

My Life in Summers

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My Life in Summers

by [oneclicklater](#)

Summary

Pacifica Northwest is mostly content with her cozy life in a boring town, until her ex-best friend Mabel Pines strolls back into it, and memories of their complicated history begin to surface. When Mabel reveals her summer plans, the two become more involved in each other's lives than they ever thought possible, and who knows? They might even be good for one another.

One

PART ONE: MY IDENTITY CRISIS, AND EVERYTHING IN-BETWEEN

A fifty dollar tip, just for a couple of pancakes and some hash browns. I pocket the cash and look to the door, to say thank you, but it swings closed and the man is already getting in his car.

Another day, another giant tip at Greasy's diner. Lindsay has this theory that the diner is a popular rest stop for rich businessmen traveling from Washington to California, and my natural charm milks them dry. By natural charm, I think she means my blond hair and my sizable breasts.

Lindsay is the owner of this substandard establishment, taking over from her mother, Susan, who passed away about five years back. She is fifty years old and beautiful, with wavy blond locks and smooth, gravity-defying skin. She is the warmest person you will meet in the whole state of Oregon. Two years ago, my job interview here took place over a booth with a coffee and a plate of freshly-baked cookies, and I got the job just by feigning interest about the lady's cats. I call her my second mother, though I like her a lot more than my real mom. We won't get into that right now.

The diner itself is an ancient repurposed train carriage, except the metal exterior has been torn out and replaced by wood. From the outside, the place resembles a giant log on wheels. I don't know why that draws in a slew of tourists year-round, but it does. It lies on the outskirts of my home town, the one and only Gravity Falls. Never heard of it? Good. You're normal.

I wipe down the table and carry one plate back behind the counter. I pass it through the window to the kitchen for Julio to take, catching a wave of that permanent, unbearable heat that I don't know how he hasn't died from. I turn away from it and wipe the sweat from my forehead.

The bell above the door rings and in my peripheral vision, I clock a couple sit down at the booth I just cleaned. My cheeks puff out as I exhale. 3:30 P.M., and the lunch rush has not let up. It's Friday, too, and we're only going to get busier over the rest of the weekend.

Lindsay squeezes my shoulder from behind and says, "take a break. I'll get this one."

"It's fine," I tell her, pulling my notepad from my front pocket. "You're busy enough as it is."

Halfway to the table, I regret my decision. On my first step, I see a girl sitting on one side of the booth. On my second step, I see long brown hair that curls a little at the end, I see a red sweater, and I see blue jeans and sandals. On my third, I think, no. No, it can't *possibly* be her.

But it is. She is here. *Here*. Plain as day.

I panic. My heart surges, my clammy palms dart to my hair to smooth it back, to ensure every strand is neatly tucked away in my ponytail. I glance down at my sky blue shirt, scrutinize it for coffee stains or grease or crumbs, all of the things that are totally reasonable to be on the front of a waitress' clothes but that I will not accept right now. I think I'm in the clear. Is there a zit on my forehead? Nope, I popped that this morning. Shit, this is ridiculous. It does not matter. *She* does not matter.

Stepping up to the table, I recite, "hey guys, welcome to Greasy's. What can I get you?"

There is a man sat opposite her, most likely in his mid-twenties. I decide to focus solely on his bearded face. He stares back at me for a moment and then says, "do you not have the concept of *ladies first* up here in Oregon?"

Oh. He is a prick. I narrow my eyes at him. "Excuse me?"

"Jason," the girl across from him hisses. "Don't be a jerk."

If her appearance didn't give it away, her voice does. Unmistakeable. Kind of nasally, like she perpetually has a tissue stuffed in one nostril, but in an adorable way.

Not adorable. Irritating. I do not like her.

"I'll have a strawberry milkshake, please," she says, as my quivering fingers struggle to grip the pen, "and he will have a coffee because he is *clearly* not fully awake yet, despite it being 3 P.M."

"Sure," I murmur. "You want spit in that?"

Jason's glowering eyes catch mine. "What?"

"You want cream in that?"

"No. Black."

Mabel giggles as I turn away. Jason sounds irritable; maybe he can't figure out why his pubic hair keeps growing out of his chin. When I'm behind the safety of the counter, I clutch it with my hands and face the wall, exhaling bottomless breaths.

Lindsay materializes out of nowhere again and rubs my shoulder. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yep. Mhmm. Fine," I lie, grabbing a clean cup and a glass from under the counter.

"Why don't you go lie down for a little bit, hon?"

"That... that sounds great, actually," I sigh. I thought I could handle a couple more tables. I was not expecting *her* to walk in.

I let myself into the tiny break room adjoining the kitchen, which consists of one couch and a desk with a computer running a Windows 98 screensaver. I fall into the plushy cushions and shut my eyes, but when I keep seeing her face in my eyelids I plaster them open and gaze at the grease stain on the ceiling. How did that even get up there?

About fifteen minutes pass, I think. Time only loosely exists in the break room. Lindsay comes in and waves a ten dollar bill in my face.

"What's this?"

"From the girl at table four," she says. "She said she apologizes for the man's behavior."

I take the bill with a tentative hand and knit my eyebrows. It doesn't confirm that she recognized me. Mabel would have done that for anybody.

I wake up in my second-floor apartment, on the couch, to my feet being tickled. The first thing I see as my eyelids flutter open is black curly hair and a satisfied smirk - my roommate, Nina. A pretty sight, sure, but she isn't immune to my morning wrath. I grunt and check my phone.

"Ugh, what the fuck? It's only 8 o'clock."

"Didn't make it to your bed last night then?"

Slightly dazed, I sit up and examine myself to find I am still wearing yesterday's work clothes. I replay last night's events on fast-forward, but nothing scandalous springs to mind. "I must have crashed out when I got home."

Nina, arms folded and foot beating the carpet, doesn't seem satisfied by that answer. We'll call her my *third* mother. "Did you have a drink?"

"No," I tell her, and rub at my temples. I have a headache, but if I have been sleeping since I got home then that's twelve hours, and anything longer than nine usually has that effect. "At least, I don't think so."

She rolls her eyes and stomps to the kitchen adjoining our living room.

"No, I definitely didn't. I left the diner and I came straight here, and I didn't drink anything here, because look-" I lift up all the couch cushions, gesture wildly to the coffee table. "Nothing."

"Alright," she concedes. "Coffee?"

I sit at one of the bar stools at the kitchen counter and nod. My head falls naturally into my hands and I catch a whiff of my shirt - fries. Lots and lots of fries. My nose scrunches up. "Think you could wash these for me before my shift?"

Nina fixes me with the coldest of looks as the coffee brews. "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response."

"It's just that you're so much better at it than I am."

"I'm better at throwing clothes into a washing machine and turning it on?"

"Yeah but you have to pour in the detergent and I always forget which tray you're supposed to pour it into."

"The left one," she sighs. "It's the left one."

Nina's a pretty great roommate. She's the same age as I am but she has the whole responsible-adult thing down to a tee, probably because she was raised to do shit by herself and not depend on everyone around her like a newborn puppy. I'm the newborn puppy. I was raised by narcissistic moneybags and butlers that fueled my laziness and threw cash at my problems to make them go away. I'll use that as the excuse for why I barely know how to operate a washing machine.

"Are you going to your AA meeting today?" Nina asks, while I'm trying to enjoy my first sip of coffee.

"Probably not today."

"Okay. Wrong answer. I'm driving you there."

"Ugh, do I have to? It's so humiliating. We all have to sit in a circle on those awful plastic chairs and I have to say, hey, everyone, I'm a twenty-one-year-old alcoholic."

"Better to be a twenty-one-year-old *recovering* alcoholic than a twenty-one-year-old alcoholic though, don't you think? Also, I'm not sure if you've noticed this, but everybody in an AA meeting is also an alcoholic, so I don't know who you think is making you feel humiliated."

I gaze into my coffee, at the steam rising up. Floating away, fading to nothing. Sometimes I wish I could float away.

Nina places her hands over mine. Her eyes are deep, understanding, caring. "Pacifica, you know if you can't bring yourself to attend one AA meeting you don't stand a chance of beating this thing, don't you?"

Tough love. I don't deserve her. I nod.

"Be ready to leave by 9:30."

Before I change my clothes, I withdraw the cash from the back pocket of my pants and stash it away in the piggy bank in my bedroom. When I take money out of the piggy, the piggy knows exactly what I am going to spend it on. If the piggy senses that I'm going to use the money to drink, the piggy judges me with its cold black eyes, and I don't like being judged by non-sentient objects. Look, I'm not insane, alright? When the tried and true methods of curing alcoholism don't work, you have to start thinking outside the box.

We pull up outside the community center in White City, half an hour's drive from Gravity Falls, where my Alcoholics Anonymous group meets every Saturday morning, sometimes with my presence and sometimes without. Maybe I would be more motivated to show up if there were a group closer to home, but probably not. Getting here is the easy part - the hard part is walking up the steps and crossing the threshold of the door, because that's admitting I have a serious problem. Like a complacent little kid, I gaze out the window at the building without unbuckling my seatbelt.

"Okay," Nina says in that hesitant tone, like she's scared I'm about to have a mental breakdown. "I'll pick you up in an hour?"

"Yeah. Thank you," I tell her, finding the courage to step out into the early-summer air.

Nina smiles sympathy and drives away.

Every now and then, this pesky yoga group steals our regular meeting room because they need natural light to properly cleanse their souls, or some similar bullshit. There's a note on the door telling me that we're in one of the underground conference rooms today, so I trudge to the elevator and lower myself into the well of misery that is my AA group.

I'm on time this week, at least, so Sarah is there to greet me at the door. She's always so happy to see me, which I don't understand. I'm not exactly a pillar of friendliness within the group. Then again, the woman is always happy to see anyone. She's in her early forties with brown frizzy hair, and six years ago she kicked her alcohol addiction and replaced it with coffee. I take a chair in the half-formed circle and browse Facebook on my phone, trying to resist the temptation of looking up Mabel Pines and finding out why she was in Gravity Falls. Whether it was only for a day. Whether I'll ever see her again.

If it were up to me, AA meetings would be an hour of this - let us all wallow in our own pity, let the talkative ones talk among themselves. Sometimes all I need is a long timeout in a room that doesn't have a drop of alcohol within reach. But, alas, the rest of the group filters in and it's time to start sharing our stories.

The people that are here week after week tell abridged versions of theirs, primarily to update everyone on how many weeks sober they are. Or months. Or in one man's case, two years. If

you've been sober for two years and you still turn up to an AA meeting every week, isn't that just bragging? I've been told not to think things like that. This is a judgement-free zone.

But this could be as judgement-free as a jury full of kittens and I still wouldn't share what I've been up to lately. What would I say? I haven't had a drink in seven days, but when I did, I made out with a stranger in some other stranger's house, drafted a text to my mom telling her I loved her and I missed her and then sent it to the number of my nearest Domino's, and then I passed out on the floor next to the door of my apartment because I was trying to use the wrong key. These are the things that I try to erase from my memory the morning after they happen. What good would come from declaring them out loud, days after the fact?

So I shake my head when Sarah asks if I would like to share, and she at least understands and moves swiftly to the woman on my left.

But Sarah also very much believes that actually making an effort to stop drinking is key in one's battle to stop drinking, so when the hour's up, she is leaning on the wall by the main entrance of the building, and I take a deep breath. This is my own fault. I always make myself a coffee to-go after the meeting so I don't have to walk out with everyone else and partake in small-talk.

"I see you've given up trying to be subtle," I say. "You are literally blocking my way out of the building."

Sarah shrugs and grins at me like we're a sitcom duo. "You don't have to speak to me if you don't want to."

"What's up?"

"I think it's great you came this week. But, sometimes, only sometimes, I get the feeling that you'd rather not be here at all."

Duh?

"And it's fine if you don't want to share every week. AA isn't all about talking and you can gain a lot by listening, but AA starts with wanting to get better. And if you don't share your story with us - again, that's fine - then we might want to look at other avenues we can explore to begin helping you. You do want to get better, don't you?"

I let out a sigh. "I want to get better for the people around me. Like Nina. And my boss."

"There we go, that's a start." She smiles, places an arm on my shoulder. I resist my instinct to jerk away. "I won't keep you any longer, but next week, keep Nina and your boss in your head, see if that makes a difference. Once you break through this first barrier - sharing with the group for the first time - I think you'll be surprised by how easy it becomes to say whatever's on your mind. Okay?"

I manage a smile. "Okay. Thank you, Sarah."

Nina's sitting on the hood of her car in the parking lot, smiling at me. "Oh," she says, spotting Sarah walking to her own car on the other side of the lot. "Is that her? Is that Sarah?" Sarah turns her head at the sound of her name and Nina waves obnoxiously.

I thwack her hand away. "Don't do that," I hiss. "That's embarrassing."

When we're back in the car, the DJ on the local radio station repeats the same news story we've been hearing for weeks about a sheep gone missing. "How was it?" Nina asks me.

I hold in a groan. As much as I hate giving my AA meetings a post-mortem, I shouldn't be mad at her for caring. "What do you want me to say? It was great! I got to listen to lots of exciting stories about how people's lives have fallen apart."

She shakes her head. "You know, this whole thing would be a lot easier if you kept a positive attitude."

"Yeah, well." I turn my head and gaze out at the fields scrolling by. "That isn't really me."

I start my shift at the diner at 2 P.M., not drunk. On Saturdays, Lindsay takes off at 7 and I'm left to handle customers on my own until 11, when we close up for the night. The great thing about that is that by 11, I'm too tired to do anything but head straight home and fall asleep.

It's kind of nice, working the evening shift by myself. I dim the lights when it gets dark outside, and then we're an orange glow by the side of the road, a beacon of warmth in the gloomy forest. We usually have a handful of quiet patrons that make small orders, and Julio cooks me something from the menu, at random, which I'll then eat at the bar with minimal interruptions.

Tonight, I'm mopping the floor behind the counter when Wendy Corduroy, a long-time friend of mine, walks in and slinks into an empty booth. I start brewing some coffee for her and hurry over to the other side of her table.

"What happened?" I ask her. "Aren't you supposed to be on a date?"

"Yup. I left the bowling alley, I couldn't stand him."

I belly-laugh and disrupt the serenity. "Are you serious?"

"Oh yeah, he was disgusting. Dude very clearly had not washed his hair today, and then, get this," she says, leaning across the table, "he started lecturing me that if you review the news footage, there was something really odd about how the towers collapsed on 9/11. Completely unprompted."

"What? You're making that up."

"P, you have no idea. I had to get out of there. I told him I had to take a phone call outside, then I booked it. He's probably still standing at the lane, wondering whether to take my turn for me."

I let my giggles fizzle out and then I stand to go pour her coffee, but she stops me.

"No coffee, thanks. I stopped at the bar on the way here, actually."

"Oh." I hate that just the mention of a bar makes me so uncomfortable.

"Actually, do you guys sell beer here? Bad joke. I'm sorry."

"It's fine," I say, and then we sigh in unison.

"Three dates, now. Three dates in a row where the guy has turned out to be a total shithhead. I don't know how it's never obvious from their profiles."

"Sounds like it's time to switch over to girls."

She snickers. "Yeah, maybe."

"And you know I'm first in line when you do."

"Oh, really? You've reserved me, have you?"

"I'm just saying," I smirk, "I smell nice, I have clean hair, and I recognize 9/11 as an act of terrorism. A lot of girls do."

"I dunno, P. You're too dainty and delicate. I'd be worried about pulverizing you in bed."

"So you've thought about it?"

"Alright, settle down. If I ever lose interest in boys, you'll be the first to know. I promise."

"Oh my *god*," I blurt out, remembering something. "Guess who waltzed into this very fucking diner yesterday afternoon?"

"What? Who?"

"Guess."

"Who?!"

"Only Mabel freaking Pines."

Wendy's hands fly to her mouth. "What?"

"Yeah. I started hyperventilating, for real."

"Holy shit. Have you spoken to her since?"

"Nope. Not a word."

"What did you say to her?"

"Nothing. Not directly, at least. I just took her order. She was with a guy, too, and I think it was the same guy as before."

"No way. From four years ago?"

"His name was Jason, right?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Same guy, then. Unless it's a coincidence."

"Do you think Dipper's with them?" Wendy asks, her eyes lighting up.

"I have no idea. Like I said, I didn't talk to them at all. I don't know if they've been here long or if they're staying for long."

"Man, I haven't spoken to Dipper in *so* long. I should call him."

An old man in the corner of the restaurant calls me over to pay his check. I hold the door open for him as he leaves, my mind suddenly ablaze with thoughts of the Pines twins. Lost memories, flickering back to life. I sit back down opposite Wendy, but we're both silent for a while, pensive.

"Do you still think about her?" she asks.

Hmm. In the early hours of the morning, as I toss and turn and try to fall asleep. At the bottom of a bottle, when her face digs its way out of the deepest crevice of my mind. Whenever I walk past the Mystery Shack, and I glance up at the window to the attic, and the light is always off.

"Yeah," I say, but my voice comes out as more of a croak. "A lot."

Two

In the summer that I was fourteen, I was getting pretty good at playing the piano.

Every Sunday, the bar on Main Street opened its doors to people of all ages for open-mic night, and the usual flock of drunks was replaced by children, parents, elderlies, anybody that had nothing better to do than take a gamble on local talent for a few hours. Quite often, the stage was a train wreck that you couldn't look away from. Male belly-dancers, racist comedians, that kind of thing. All you needed to do to bring out the worst or the weirdest in people was give them a microphone and the attention of fifty-odd people.

But no matter how bad it got, the bar patrons had a newcomer to depend on for a solid quarter-hour of entertainment, and her name was Pacifica Northwest. From 8 P.M. to 8:15, the stage was all mine, and I would regale the audience with a couple of classical pieces I learned from my piano teacher, then move on to renditions of more contemporary tunes that I learned on YouTube, most of which I sang along to as well. The latter always received more praise.

It was the second week in June. I arrived at the bar at 7:45, with enough time to chug a lemonade and slink into a seat by the stage. I caught the tail-end of an Elton John cover act. He was really, really bad, which was great for me, because I had the chance to wake everybody up and dazzle them.

There was a round of applause for fake-Elton, and then the bar owner called me up to the stage. The uproar of a crowd following my name spoken out loud was something I would never grow tired of. I sat at the piano bench, wiped down the keys with a tissue - you'd be surprised how often people left unidentified sticky residue behind - and then I looked up. And my eyes landed on a booth at the far end of the bar, on a familiar face I had nearly forgotten everything about. His name was Dipper. We had become friends at the very end of last summer. He wasn't from around here, though, so he left at the end of August and I hadn't heard from him since.

Under the faint glow of the lamp at his table, I saw him smile right at me. I cleared my throat, frowned at the piano, tried to remember what I had come here to do. I reached into my purse and retrieved the crumpled up sheet music, smoothed it out in front of me.

"Um, hello everyone. I'm going to start off tonight with *Twilight Waltz*, and then we'll move on to some tunes you might find more familiar."

More applause and whistles. I wanted to look up at Dipper again, make sure he was still there, but decided against it. My heart jumped a little at the sight of him and I didn't want to deal with that while I was trying to focus on the music. I flexed my fingers one final time, exhaled into the silence, and began to play.

There isn't much I can say about how I played the piano. You just hit the right keys, at precisely the right times, and it sounds beautiful. Some people like to get all fancy with it, and jolt and sway around like a marionette while they play. My teacher described it as a way of infusing emotion into the music. I never really bothered - it still sounded the same.

I transitioned into *Piano Man* by Billy Joel, then finished my set with *Landslide* by Fleetwood Mac. Being up there on stage, singing my heart out, it was therapeutic. It was a welcome opportunity to forget everything for a while, including the faces watching me play. Just me and the music.

But the music always came to an end, and the lights came up, and people clapped. Reality set in. I drew a deep breath from the stuffy atmosphere and scanned the audience. He was still there, with his family sat around him. The sister, and the uncle.

"Thank you," I said into the microphone. "I'm here every Sunday, same time. Thank you."

I sat at a barstool and asked for a glass of water. Wondered what I would say when I approached Dipper. Wondered why the thought of approaching him made my arms break out in goosebumps. This train of thought turned out to be redundant, because he appeared right beside me and tapped my shoulder.

"Dipper. Hey."

"So you do remember me."

Remember him? Of course I remembered him. Was I not supposed to remember him? *Oh, crap, he's waiting for me to speak.*

"I caught your eye earlier and you frowned at me," he said, chuckling.

"Yeah. No, I wasn't frowning at you, I think I was just trying to concentrate. It's, um, it's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too. You were *incredible* up there, by the way. Like, so much better than anyone else in here."

"Oh," I laughed, looking at my shoes.

What. Are. You. Doing. Act normal.

"Thank you."

It was pretty clear, at this point, that the crush I had begun to develop at the end of last summer had bubbled back to the surface. I was not expecting his voice to be deeper. He was leaning on the bar, too, like a cowboy. Maybe he had a wagon parked out front and he'd ask me to join him on his journey into the north-west. *Swoon.*

I realized that those ten seconds spent thinking about his wagon had been in total silence.

"Hey, do you want to come sit with us?" he said, glancing back to the booth. "Mabel's here, and you remember my uncle Stan?"

"Oh. I can't actually, I have a stupid 9 P.M. curfew. Um. But I'll be here again next weekend?"

"Ok, cool. I'll be here too."

"Awesome." I smiled.

The following week, I took a shot in the dark and asked my parents if they were going to come and watch me perform. They said no, they were busy. When I left the house that evening, they were sat around the fireplace, reading in silence. I rolled my eyes and stepped outside without a word.

My driver, Ricardo, was waiting in the black BMW. I pulled up the hood of my coat and jogged across the front lawn through heavy rain, then clambered into the warmth of the vehicle. It had

been about nine months now since my family had moved into this three-bedroom house, out in one of the regular neighborhoods that we used to literally look down on from our hilltop manor. The manor was under new ownership, after my carelessly entrepreneurial father invested in flimsy currencies that no longer exist and was forced to sell it.

Losing tens of millions of dollars in one swoop takes its toll on a person. Since then, my parents had become totally despondent. Whenever I walked into a room, they would look up for a second and go right back to whatever they were doing, as if I didn't exist. They would either bicker with one another under their breaths, or coexist in silence. Dead souls in flesh shells.

I tried not to think about it, focused my energy on wiping down the piano. A glance into the crowd stung me with disappointment. Several faces I had hoped to see, none of them were here.

There was one girl by herself, in the back. Mabel Pines - Dipper's sister, in a red sundress, sipping a milkshake. She caught my eye, smiled, and waved. I ignored her.

But she followed me out of the bar half an hour later, and called out my name. If the rain hadn't stopped while I was inside, I would have ducked into the car and told Ricardo to floor it. I wasn't in the mood to talk to this permanent ray of sunshine.

That may have sounded like a compliment to Mabel, but it wasn't. Imagine a ray of sunshine in your eyes while you're trying to sleep. Mabel was like that.

"Wow," she said, ambling up the sidewalk with her hands clasped at her front. "Is there anything you can't do?"

"What?"

"I was- I said, is there anything you can't do?"

"There are plenty of things I can't do."

She frowned. I got the feeling we weren't on the same page.

"Hey, is Dipper with you?" I asked.

"No, he's gone out with Wendy and some other guys. They said they were gonna go check out an abandoned building. I wasn't so interested."

"Wendy?"

"Yeah, she works at the Shack. You've met her, I think." She grinned and rolled her eyes. "Dipper's like, totally in love with her, but don't tell him I said that."

I ground my teeth. "Huh. Alright, well, bye."

I got into the car. If she said anything else, I didn't hear it.

Ricardo swiveled his nosy head. "A friend of yours?"

"Not really."

"Does she need a ride somewhere?"

"She's fine," I said, glancing out the window. She was just standing on the sidewalk, watching me. She always had been a strange one. "Just drive."

The next morning, I met Tiffany and Alina at our usual hang-out spot in the park. They were sitting side-by-side on a picnic bench, sharing earbuds, nodding their heads to something. I strutted up to them and planted my hands on my hips.

"What the hell?" I said. "Where were you last night?"

Tiffany let out an elongated *oh*. "That was last night?"

"I texted you about it yesterday afternoon. Nice try."

"Pacifica, we're just not that into piano music," Alina piped up.

"You don't have to be *into* piano music. If one of you guys decided to do something interesting with your lives, I would come and support you."

"Would you really, though?"

"Yes!"

"Whatever," Tiffany said, yanking the earbud out and standing up. "It doesn't matter. We're gonna go check out that new outlet store in the mall, *Eternally Cute*. Are you coming?"

"No, screw you," I said, turning on my heels and willing myself not to cry.

"Pacifica, don't be so dramatic."

"You're supposed to be my friends. I've been playing at that bar for weeks, and I ask you to come *once*, and you can't even drop me a text to tell me you're not gonna be there. No apology. Nothing."

I walked away with my head down, and they stayed silent behind me.

It got to another Sunday night and the bar was once again devoid of the people that should have cared about me.

She was there again, though, in the same seat as before. She was playing with the sleeve of a blue sweater, a pink flower in her hair. Once again, she caught me staring at her and waved, and before I could stop it, my hand drifted upwards and waved back. It was unlike me.

My music was tainted by anger, that night. I was angry at the world, angry at the people around me, angry at myself because *I* was the reason people didn't love me, I was cold, and mean, and I repelled people away. My fingers kept pounding the keys, which made every other note boom into the microphone. My voice would dip into an ugly deep pitch that I didn't recognize, and in my frustration I started missing notes by a fraction of a beat. It was all a mess, nothing sounded right, so I cut my set short and stormed out of the bar through an audience that was less enthusiastic than I was used to.

I didn't need to look to know who swung open the door behind me. She called out, "Pacifica, hey," and again I contemplated jumping in the car and jetting. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," I said. "What do you want?"

Her mouth hung open for a moment. "I just wanted to say how great you sounded. If I had a voice

like that, you wouldn't be able to keep it shut," she laughed. "I'd be up on stage every night."

I didn't understand her. She was like this when I met her before, skipping around town with an apparent goal to make friends with everybody that so much as looked at her. I snapped. "What are you doing? Why do you keep coming to these and why do you keep following me outside afterwards?"

That wiped the smile right off her face. "I thought we could... I don't know, be friends. Candy and Grenda aren't in Gravity Falls this year, and Dipper's always running off with Wendy and her friends... I've been lonely. Sorry for trying to be nice."

I watched her brown locks whip back and forth as she walked back to the entrance, and something buried deep inside of me broke. The last week had been the loneliest I'd felt in my life. "We could be friends," I blurted out.

She turned around, tilted her head like a confused dog. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

We stood in an awkward limbo, ten feet apart on the sidewalk. I cut the distance between us and said, "my parents are holding a party at my place on the fourth of July. Um... you wanna come?"

Her face lit up like Christmas. "Okay."

On the day of the party, my parents came to life. At about 4 P.M., I trudged downstairs in my pajamas and stood in the sunroom eating cereal. I watched them dart around the back yard, hurling orders at the slew of people they had hired to ensure their evening went smoothly. They even appeared to be talking to each other without any bitterness on their tongues.

This was their first attempt at hosting guests since moving out of the mansion, and knowing my parents, they would settle for no less than a unanimous success. It was kind of pathetic, if you asked me. They hurried about like ants, smoothing out tablecloths, straightening cutlery, as if their lives were dependent on the outcome of this one freaking party. I bit into a cluster of oats and vowed that I would never take one single thing that seriously, but I accidentally vowed it out loud and dribbled milk onto the floor. I left it to soak into the carpet. Hopefully my mother would see it just before people arrived and freak the hell out.

The guests were due to arrive at 8, but some old douchebag and a wife half his age showed up at 6, so I was summoned to the yard to 'entertain' - and by that, my parents meant, 'make a cheese and grape platter and stand around like a human buffet table.'

I obeyed, but I ate all the grapes and then left a plate of cheese kebabs on the table for the early arrivals to enjoy. I wandered off to the front yard and sat on a bench, looking out into the road. I had texted Mabel the address and told her to get here for 7:30, so I figured I'd wait around out here until she turned up. Hanging out with somebody my age beat mingling with all the middle-aged snobs in my back yard, no matter how different Mabel and I were.

I had the sudden recollection that she wasn't a particularly good dresser, often choosing to knit her own clothes, like my grandma. It was likely that she would stick out like a sore thumb among my parents' company. Oh well. If it pissed them off, I was all for it.

But Mabel strolled up the pathway half an hour later, and she looked gorgeous. An indigo blue dress, clearly bought in an actual store, black heels. She had curled her hair. She wasn't so clueless

after all.

I led her around the side of the house to the yard, and my parents, apparently having developed some kind of sixth sense for uninvited visitors, both turned towards us and hurried across the lawn from opposite ends of it. Presumably fearing that she was about to be lynched, Mabel stepped behind me.

"Pacifica," my dad said under his breath. "Who is this?"

"A friend."

"Oh is she now? Because the only *friends* on the guest list are Tiffany and Alina, and she isn't either of them."

"I didn't want Tiffany or Alina to be here, so I asked Mabel instead."

"Pacifica," Mabel whispered loudly in my ear. "Am I not supposed to be here?"

"She isn't on the guest list," said my father, tapping the clipboard in his hand.

"Well here's what I think of your stupid guest list," I yelled, plucking it from his hands and tossing it into the hedge.

Mabel stumbled along behind me as I dragged her by the arm across the lawn, into the far corner where nobody would bother us.

"I hate them," I told her. "I have no freedom when they're throwing parties."

"I'm sure they mean well," she said, smiling.

"Um. I've known them for fourteen years. They absolutely do not mean well."

Mabel told me about life in California until the sun set. I had always pictured moving down there when I was old enough to ditch my parents, maybe to a nice house on the beach. With a hammock, and a pool. My closet of bikinis and summer dresses were definitely better suited for the warmer climate.

We had created this little bubble in the corner of the yard, sitting at our own table eating steak off the barbecue and sharing stories about school, but inevitably, my dad had to come along and burst it. I saw him charging across the lawn over Mabel's shoulder. He stepped right up into my space, and bent down until his nose was inches from mine. Close enough to spit in his face, if I really wanted to.

He asked - or ordered - me to go inside and start washing the dishes. Fooling myself into thinking he could be reasoned with, I argued that the fireworks were about to start.

"Well maybe I would have allowed you to stay out here if you hadn't openly disrespected your mother and I earlier. Dishes, now."

He glanced down at Mabel, who didn't seem fazed by the man whatsoever. She stared right back at him and loudly sipped from a Diet Coke can with a straw.

"And maybe you can bring your little friend along to help, seeing as she wasn't invited but has helped herself to the food regardless."

I waited until his back was turned and stuck my tongue out. "Come on," I muttered, grabbing

Mabel's arm and leading her back to the house.

The kitchen counters were stacked with dirty plates, glasses, and silverware. A true portrait of gluttony. I went straight to the refrigerator as Mabel whistled behind me.

"Where should I start?" she asked.

I picked out a bunch of grapes and found a clean bowl to put them in. "What do you mean? We're not *actually* gonna clean up after those slob."

"We're not?"

I moved to the foot of the stairs, popped a grape into my mouth. "I don't know about you, but I didn't put up with my parents' bullshit friends all evening just to miss the only good bit of the party."

Mabel's soft footfalls came up the stairs behind me, and followed all the way to my bedroom. She stepped onto the purple carpet and said, "holy wow. Your room is *huge*."

I glanced around, at the queen bed, the walk-in closet, the grand piano. "Is it? My old one was bigger."

"It's like, three times the size of my room at home. And even that's bigger than the attic I share here with Dipper."

On the far side of the room, I drew the curtains and slid open the door to the balcony overlooking our back yard. "Voila," I said, but Mabel didn't respond because she was fixated on the piano, running her hand along the lid. "Don't touch that," I snapped, which shocked her, and admittedly shocked myself a little too. I supposed I was protective over my belongings.

"Sorry," I said. "It's expensive."

"How long have you been playing for?"

"Um. Since I was about eight. I have lessons every week."

She grinned and shook her head. "You're unfair."

"Huh?"

"You. You're unfair. You're smart, and talented, and beautiful. You have this huge house and all these lovely things," she sighed as she twirled and gestured to the room, her voice full of wonder. She brushed past me, out onto the balcony, and my eyebrows furrowed.

"Yeah, but you have a brother and a family that loves you. Probably a lot more friends, too."

Mabel turned to me with a blank expression. Embarrassed, I leaned on the concrete railing and gazed into the black forest beyond the yard. She started to say something, but the first firework whistled into the sky and made both of us jump. There were cheers and whoops from the crowd below us, with my dad's distinct laugh cutting through the noise. The kind of laugh that screamed *everybody pay attention to me*. I tried to tune it out and focus on the explosions of light high above me.

Red, white, and blue. An arm nudged me. "If you make a wish just as a firework explodes, it'll come true," Mabel said.

"I don't think that's a thing."

"Well, I'm making it a thing."

There was a lull in the display, but I squinted as somebody on the ground lit a fuse and over the bang, I yelled, "I wish my parents treated me like a daughter and not like an inconvenience."

Another few seconds of quiet. "I don't think you're supposed to say them out loud," Mabel told me.

"Well, I'm making that a thing, too."

"Okay. I wish Candy and Grenda had come back this year. I miss them."

"I wish... I wish my friends liked me for me."

"I wish I had bigger boobs."

A laugh rocketed from my lips. "I wish my hair was naturally straight."

"I wish Tom Henderson would notice me at school."

"I wish that Tom Henderson never notices you, ever."

"Hey!" She shoved my shoulder. "No fair, you can't cancel out my wishes!"

"Except I just did," I smirked.

Her laughter fizzled out just as the fireworks did, and the huddle of suits and dresses broke out in applause. I watched them spread back out into circles, trading mindless banter, as Mabel and I ate grapes from the bowl I had balanced on the railing. All of these people would likely be moseying around my yard late into the night, and when it got too cold, their voices would migrate to the house and boom through the floorboards as I tried to sleep. It was all too familiar. I sighed and rested my chin in my hands.

Mabel's finger extended out over the railing, pointed right at my dad. "Bet you I can hit him from here," she said, holding a grape out in front of me.

Before I could advise her otherwise, a green pellet soared into the brightly lit yard and hit my father square in the eye. He dropped his drink to the grass and looked around frantically, half-blinded. Mabel and I fell to the floor in synchrony, ducking out of view. Her hands were clasped over her mouth and her eyes were wide as golf balls. "I was only joking," she whispered through her fingers. "I didn't mean to actually hit him."

Replaying the look on my dad's face, I burst into incredulous laughter, clutching my stomach. Mabel keeled over in a fit of giggles as well, and before long we were both sprawled out on the cold concrete floor of the balcony. I wiped a tear from my eye and said, "if he looks up here, he's gonna see the bowl of grapes and the open door."

"I'm never gonna be allowed back here again," she gasped. "They're gonna get a restraining order."

Another burst of chuckles filled the air between us. I couldn't remember the last time I had laughed so much. Had I ever?

"If you keep throwing stuff at my parents," I said to her, "we're going to get along just fine."

It was about two weeks later that I saw the whole Pines ensemble at the bar again. I had gotten used to seeing Mabel week after week, her braces glistening in the light as she grinned up at the stage, but now the one with the fur hat and the one with the fez were back.

I strummed out a few classical tracks as always, and segued into a shorter version of *Free Bird*, which drew out raucous applause from the herd of bikers that had wound up at the bar that evening.

At the end of the set, I hopped onto a stool and downed the glass of water that had been set out for me, and smiled at Mabel as she skipped up to the end of the bar.

"Incredible as ever," she said, squeezing my arm. "Are you staying behind?"

"Yeah, for a little bit. I'm just gonna take these out to my driver," I told her, picking up the bag of pork rinds next to my water.

I walked out to the BMW, knocked on Ricardo's window. He looked up from a crossword puzzle and wound it down. I held out the bag. "Got you your favorite."

"Ah, Pacifica, you are a savior," he said, beaming. "Thank you."

"One of these days you'll find a place to park and come inside to watch me."

"I wish I could, my dear, but you know that would be against the rules. I have strict orders from-"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You have strict orders from my dumbass parents to stay in the car at all times. Alright, I'll be out in thirty."

Dipper was hanging around by the door of the bar, waiting to speak to me. I took a deep breath and attempted a smile, but the result was one of those straight-line not-really-a-smile-smiles.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

A couple seconds of silence. Was I free to go? "You were great in there. Really great."

"Thanks." I inspected a chipped nail.

"Hey, um, me and a couple of friends were gonna have a pool day tomorrow. Over at the public pool? I was wondering if you'd like to come along."

My eyes drifted through the window of the bar, and landed on the girl dressed in pink, her ponytail swinging from side to side as she energetically told a story to a biker twice her size. I felt the corner of my lip tug upwards.

"If you're busy, or whatever, it's cool. You know, no worries."

I looked Dipper in his nervous eyes, and decided to cut right to the chase. "Is Mabel gonna be there?"

Three

Chapter Notes

I've changed the rating of this to M, as things get a little more... mature, from this point on. Strong language, mild sex references, mild violence, and a couple of themes much later on in the story that might be upsetting to sensitive readers. There's nothing to warrant any Archive Warnings. If you're worried at all and would like more info, feel free to PM me.

Thank you to everyone who has left kudos and comments! I really appreciate it.

Nina has gone up to Portland to visit her boyfriend again, a bombshell she dropped on me just this morning, an hour before heading out the door.

"Again?" I exclaimed, sprawled out on the floor making carpet-angels with my arms. "Is it getting serious?"

I heard her exhale a tornado in the kitchen. "It's been six months!"

"I don't know if that's serious. I don't date for very long."

She didn't say anything. I know that I get on her nerves, the way I talk about her relationship like it's a passing phase, but I don't know how else to react. The weekends away are becoming more and more frequent. We've been best friends for three years, and now she's starting to choose somebody else over me.

I sat up and flicked a breadcrumb into the wall. "Whatever happened to the days when we'd spend all weekend in bed?"

Silence, for a moment. "We agreed that wasn't healthy for either of us."

"I don't think we did."

"Yes, we did. Remember how angry you used to get when I *dared* to step out of your bed and go back to my normal life?"

"Because you kept telling me you were straight, which was such a lie," I said, rising to my feet and leaning on the opposite side of the breakfast bar. Nina was slapping peanut butter to bread and stashing sandwiches away in little plastic bags. I didn't understand why. They didn't have bread in Portland? Kyle was homeless?

"I am straight," she said, eyes on the butter.

"Yes, you're the first straight girl on the planet to sleep with a lady fifty times, for hours at a time."

She looked up across the counter, one eyebrow raised, then went back to her sandwiches.

"What? What are you going to say? That I don't count?"

"See? You're getting angry again. This is why we agreed to stop."

"I seriously do not remember being a part of that conversation."

"You were probably drunk at the time."

I felt a sharp pang in my chest. Nina didn't say things like that very often. When she did, it was a niggling reminder that I hadn't changed in years. I hadn't gotten any better. "Do you think less of me? Because of the drinking?"

She met my eyes, relaxed the muscles in her face. Sympathy. "Yes."

My eyes drifted to the window, suddenly finding her gaze too confronting. A patter of rainfall beat at the glass. "Are you only saying that because you think it will help with my recovery?"

"No. You become a different person when you drink for days in a row. I don't know if I like that person so much."

Nina walked around the counter and kissed me on the cheek. I thought about swiveling my head and pecking her on the lips instead, but she had a boyfriend. I respected the rules. "I have to pack my bag. Be a dear and wash the dishes."

And then she left. And now I'm alone in the apartment, I've washed the dishes, I've vacuumed the floor, and there's nothing left to do. It is only 2 P.M. Beth is working at the diner today, in my place, because she swapped her Sunday shift for mine. Wendy is visiting her brother at the University of Oregon, trying to relive her days as a college student, I suppose.

I decide to go for a run, as I told my AA group I would this morning. It was met with an appropriately patronizing response, of course. Apparently, oohs and aahs and well-dones were how they were going to encourage me to speak up more often. I can't get behind that. I need somebody to flip a chair and tell me I'm not good enough. I need somebody to follow me around everywhere I go, somebody that can tap into my thoughts and ring a little bell whenever I think of absorbing another drop of poison. Alcoholics Anonymous: Hard Mode.

The rain gets heavier, but I don't mind. It keeps people inside - less bodies milling around the pavement for me to shove out of the way. Once I'm in the woods, kicking up mud with the heels of my sneakers, I listen to the raindrops hammer at the canopy of leaves arching over the trail. Sometimes this, and the fresh air gathering in my lungs, is enough to convince me that everything is okay. But often times not.

The abandoned fishing dock passes me by to my left, on the edge of the woods, where Mabel and I spent many an afternoon baking our skin in the sun. The forest has started to reclaim it, weeds creeping up through the gaps in the wooden planks, the far side obstructed from view. I force myself not to stop and think about it.

I take this route often, past the places that used to be ours, but until she showed up in the diner last week I had severed the mental connection between them and her. I've been walking around town all week with dread in my gut, because with any corner I turn I could come face to face with the past, but it's starting to settle down now. It's plausible that she came up for the weekend, accidentally wandered into my workplace, and now she was back home with her boyfriend, spending her summer in California as she has for the last few years.

I'm not even going to address the tiny voice in the back of my head that says I *want* to see her again, because I shouldn't. I absolutely shouldn't.

When I get back to the apartment I slump onto the couch with a bottle of water from the refrigerator, drink half of it, and pour the rest on my overheating head. An unnerving silence falls over the room. As much as I hated living in my old house, at least there I could hear birds in the trees or cars driving by, some kind of ambience. Here, my neighbors downstairs were an ancient old couple that only made noise when they killed spiders on the ceiling with their walking sticks (we knew that's what the banging was because they always apologized to us the following morning). Apart from that, it was like this room existed on another plane. Every time I stepped inside and shut the door, I was cut off from the outside world and all of its sounds.

With nothing better to do and a lack of imagination, I drift to sleep, and wake up as the sun is setting. I shove a frozen pizza in the oven and spend eighteen minutes sliding around the kitchen floor in my socks and crouching in front of the oven window, peering in, watching cheese melt.

I decide to eat it at the counter off of the little throw-away tray; less dishes to wash later. I log on to Facebook with good intentions, I swear, just to see what Nina or Wendy are up to, or if any of my high school classmates have popped out a baby this week. But I should have known I would have landed on a party invite. A guy I do not know but whose name I recognize is having a bash for no discernible reason at his house five minutes from here.

It's pathetic, really. I have so many opportunities to turn back on my decision and stay indoors. When I'm in the shower, when I'm changing into a black strapless dress, when I'm looking myself dead in the eye in the mirror, applying mascara, and I don't have the balls to tell my reflection to stop.

And then I'm reaching into the cupboard under the kitchen sink, past the bleach and the laundry detergent. The bottle I'm after is lying sideways behind the first aid kit, because Nina already knows all of the hiding places in my bedroom and she doesn't think I'm dumb enough to hide anything here. I bring it up to the counter, next to a clean glass.

I hate scotch. This is supposed to be it, the last line of defense. I squeeze the bottle to still my trembling fingers, and clench my eyes shut. Lindsay and Nina and Wendy and Sarah all pop into my mind. But none of them are here. Only the scotch is here.

I pour a glass and take a sip. Fourteen days ticks over to zero.

Two drinks later I'm out the door, carefully treading the narrow staircase in my heels. I walk out into the street, under the twilight sky, and hiccup all the way to a house in the center of town.

It's a three-story building with all of its windows illuminated, even in what looks like the attic. That unavoidable sense of déjà vu creeps up on me. So many Saturday nights in my last few years have begun just like this, a sinister building looming over the street, inviting me in to start my descent into disorder.

The front door is shut but the garage to the side of the house is wide open. Three guys that look my age are standing around the lifted hood of a car, talking under their breaths like they're actually staring down into an open coffin. If it weren't for the music thudding beyond the wall, I would think I had come to the wrong place. They turn out to be really nice, one of them hands me a beer out of a cooler and shows me inside, even gives me directions to the bathroom.

Don't read this as me bragging, but I'm aware that I'm very attractive. I inherited good genes, and growing up I had access to a wealth of beauty products and a closet the size of an average girl's bedroom, so I've had plenty of time to figure out what makes me look my best, and I try to look my

best all of the time. It therefore does not surprise me that heads turn when I saunter into a party.

Now, I know what you're thinking - if that wasn't bragging, why bother telling you? Well, this is an important first step in my method to make the most out of an evening and preferably go home arm in arm with another lady.

I start by scanning the room and taking note of the guy that ogles me for longest, and it's always somebody new. It always surprises me how many new faces I find week to week, considering I live out in the ass-end of nowhere. I have this theory that somebody keeps sending in busloads of tourists just to keep the town's inhabitants occupied, maybe a social experiment, to see if we ever notice, *Truman Show* style.

I then either approach the man, or stand on the edge of the room looking bored so he comes over and talks to me. Tonight, it's a guy in his late twenties with glasses and a scruffy goatee. I let him regale me about his life while I use the time to switch on my gaydar and scout for any women that might be batting for the same team. Sometimes it's dead easy, and there'll be somebody wearing a novelty t-shirt, like *NOBODY KNOWS I'M A LESBIAN*, or the guy I'm talking to will tell me about his gay younger sister, *she was around here somewhere, let me go look for her*, and I'll be like, *see ya!* And I'll go and look for her myself.

Other times, like tonight, nobody is giving off any telltale signs, so I'll see what other information I can coax out of the boy, or I'll start looking for the younger girls, the kind that haven't decided who they're going to be for the rest of their lives.

And then, rarely, there will be times that a giant wrench is thrown into the works, and the whole plan crumbles to pieces before it has a chance to begin. It's one of those nights, I realize, because I just saw my ex-best friend's boyfriend, the one with the beard and the flannel shirt, the one that looks like he owns a coffee shop with a chalkboard menu and has a burning hatred for Starbucks. I spot his smug face moving through the crowd, appearing and reappearing behind clusters of heads.

And if he is here, she is here. She has to be. It's just a matter of finding her.

I don't even consider it - I excuse myself away from the nameless man, tell him I'm going to the bathroom. Hey, he was only talking to me because he wanted to hook up with me, anyway. At least, that's what I always tell myself. I meander about the room with my arms folded, trying to see over people's fat heads, but I'm not tall enough. Not really looking where I'm going, I breeze through the kitchen and pick up another beer, I do a lap of the back yard and avoid being dragged into beer pong, and when I've mentally mapped out a floor plan of the entire building, I spot her in the room I started in, not ten feet from where I was standing before.

She's leaning against the fireplace in a green satin dress, her hair tied up in a neat bun.

My heart just melts on the spot, like four years of absence meant nothing. My eyes threaten to gush with tears, but there would be time for that later, not here, not while I'm surrounded by a hundred emotionally stable people.

Move, feet. Move. Forward, five spaces. Why won't you move?!

As if she can sniff out my agony, her eyes rise from the beer bottle in her hands and connect with mine, from across the room. Her foot stops tapping to the music. She looks about as mortified as I feel.

Maybe the fact that neither of us have taken a single step towards one another is a sign that we shouldn't do this. We don't need to. I'll just go home and not leave the apartment until September,

assuming she'll be gone by then.

I take a swig of Budweiser and set out on my trek across the living room. A couple of people cut in front of me, and I get this horrid feeling that when they shift out of the way Mabel will be gone, replaced by a dusty fireplace that I have no history with. But she's still there.

She's right in front of me now, actually. I clear my throat. "Hi."

It wouldn't be Mabel without one of those sweeter-than-candy smiles. "Hey."

We reach a stalemate in the conversation. I consider running. The words that I always imagined saying circle my head like vultures, but I land on, "it's so good to see you," and my body, clearly possessed, leans in for a hug.

I touch her shoulder blade and my body surges. It's one of those awkward one-arm hugs where our bodies don't meet, but she at least reciprocates. "Oh. It's great to see you too," she chirps. "How have you been?"

"Good, good," I say. "Yeah, just good. Not much else to say. How about you?"

"Yeah, I'm doing good. I, um, I'm sorry I didn't say anything in Greasy's the other day. I think I was kinda shocked to see you."

"Oh, yeah, me too. You may have noticed."

She smiles again, but mine is getting harder and harder to fake. I keep becoming acutely aware that I'm forcing it, and that makes my lips twitch. Why do we have to smile, anyway? It would be much easier to just pat each other on the head to show affection.

We play that old game of pretending to be absorbed in the music and the atmosphere, to avoid talking. I focus on a nice lamp over by the doorway. But then I chance a look at her out of the corner of my eye, and she glances over at the same time, and we both avert our eyes, and I wonder how it ever came to this.

"How long are you here for?" I ask her.

"In Gravity Falls? All summer, actually. I'm here with my-"

Somebody grabs her around the waist and she jumps out of her skin - it's flannel guy. They laugh with each other and he kisses her cheek. I sip my beer and wonder whether her skin feels gross when his beard gets all up in its business.

"Pacifica, this is Jason."

"Your boyfriend," I add, for no readily apparent reason.

"We're engaged, actually," Jason says, holding up Mabel's ring finger. Something in my throat lurches.

"Congratulations," but the word tastes toxic on my tongue.

"Hey, you work at the diner, right? You couldn't put in a good word for this one, could you? She's looking for a summer job, aren't you babe?"

"Well, yes," she says, as he kisses her neck, "but it's not up to Pacifica to find me one, is it? And I'm sure the diner already has a queue of people wanting to work there."

"We're understaffed, actually," I tell them.

Mabel's mouth opens and closes, opens again. "Really?"

"Yeah. We have Lindsay, the owner, and two waitresses including me. We had a third but she quit a couple of weeks ago. Lindsay was going to start looking for a replacement next week."

What are you doing. What. Are. You. Doing. Stop.

"That's perfect," Jason says.

"Okay. Um, I'll have to think about it," Mabel says.

"Think about what? We need the money, and you could make a shit load in tips."

"Yeah, well, I still want to think about it."

"Just pop into the diner if you're interested," I tell her. "I'll let Lindsay know you might drop by."

"Okay. Thank you."

"Right, babe, we'd better head off," Jason says, talking into the crook of Mabel's neck, which is getting fucking irritating.

"Already? It's only ten-thirty."

"Yeah, but we're up early tomorrow and you know how grumpy you get when you don't get enough sleep."

"I do not get grumpy," Mabel murmurs, but her fiancé is already on his way to the door.

I did not think I would ever again possess the ability to feel sorry for Mabel Pines, but my heart sinks a little at the embarrassment on her face.

She smiles wide, touches my arm with gentle fingertips. "It was nice to see you. I'll see you around?"

"Yeah," I breathe, watching her lean figure twirl and amble out of view.

My fingers massage my temples as my feet make haste for the kitchen. An orchestra of *hows* and *whys* and *what-the-fucks* starts up in my head, a concoction of emotions fizzle away in my stomach, but I won't address them right now. I swap my beer out for a stronger drink, hiding away in the corner of the kitchen, facing the granite countertop. It's so shiny I can make out a low-detail render of my reflection. Blurry me looks miserable.

I have a second drink, and a third.

And then the dance floor looks pretty enticing. It's in the gigantic dining area I passed through earlier, except the table has been pushed into the corner and the floor space has been invaded by restless feet. It starts to draw me in, but I have to stop and steady myself on the counter, my vision turning to a vague collection of shapes. I clench my eyes shut for a moment, and set off again.

I move with abandon, jerking my body to the beat with practiced precision. Everyone is packed so tightly together that my hips bump against others, my arms brush against shoulders, but it doesn't faze me. I spin, twirl, step between people, all of them a haze of faces and hair around me, like I'm on a carnival ride that moves too fast to make out my surroundings.

Incredibly, beyond the motion blur, I sense someone looking directly at me, so I narrow my eyes and focus on the very edge of the room, past countless shoulders and bobbing heads. There's a girl, sitting in a dining chair by herself, with shoulder-length wavy brunette bangs. It's a miracle that I even noticed her behind so many figures, an odd coincidence that we have a direct line of sight to one another when we're so far apart. I know she's thinking the same thing because she seems to take a long few seconds to notice I'm staring back at her, and when she does, she glances off to her right and bites her bottom lip.

That has to be a sign, right?

I don't stop dancing. I push my way through the throng, periodically going up on tiptoes to make sure the girl is still there. Finally, I reach the edge of the dance floor and get a full view - she's still gazing to the side, her hands folded in her lap, wearing jeans and a purple button-up blouse, like she's just walked out of an 80s high school movie.

My first thought is that she's too young to be here, but that doesn't stop me. A fire ignites within me, my predatory instincts wake up, and I move with intent, smoothing my hands up and down the torso of my dress, swaying my hips, feeling the friction build up in my palms.

She turns back to me, jolts her head in surprise, but holds my gaze. I take one final step to close the gap between our feet and hold out my hand. "Do you dance?"

Her mouth falls open, to pearly white teeth. "Huh?"

"Look at what I'm doing right now," I tell her. "Can you do this?"

She shakes her head, almost as if she's embarrassed. "Not really."

My hand, still extended, wiggles its fingers. "Come on. I'll show you how."

80s-girl looks around the room, uncertain. I assume that this is the end of the line because she doesn't want to be seen dancing with another woman, but she surprises me and takes my hand. I lead her back into the center of the dense mass of people, where I take her other hand and make the most of the room we have, shaking her arms and swinging her from side to side. It takes two seconds for a grin to break out on her face, and I smile in return.

I ask her her name.

"Zoey," she tells me.

"I'm Pacifica," I say, leaning closer so I can be heard over the music. There's a smattering of freckles across her rosy cheeks. "How old are you, Zoey?"

"Eighteen," she says, to which I think I breathe a sigh of relief. That could have taken a dark turn. "You?"

"Twenty-one."

It starts with me leading the way, but after a couple of minutes Zoey seems to break out of her shell of shyness and loses herself in the music. Our hands disconnect, she sways loosely in front of me, her eyes cast down, and just as I start to worry that the crowd will suck her in and I'll lose her, she turns around and presses her back into my torso.

My hands dart to her hips, literally welcoming the contact with open arms, and feel that her blouse has come untucked on one side. With a height advantage of about four inches, my chin lands on

her shoulder and I inhale the scent of strawberries. Whether it's her soap, or shampoo, or perfume, I don't care, because it turns me on so much that my knees nearly buckle. I blink my eyes shut and try to remember how long it has been since I felt like this. I have lost count of the months.

"Are you from around here?" the girl asks into my ear, her head tilted back.

I know that if I thrust my hips forward the proximity would be too much for me to handle, and probably render me unable to speak, so I keep the distance. "I live a few blocks away. You?"

Zoey shakes her head and murmurs something. Her bangs brush against my ear.

"How'd you end up in Gravity Falls?" I ask her, my hand rubbing her arm up and down, drawing the cuff of her sleeve closer to her shoulder with every motion.

"I came down here for the week to see my grandparents. I live up in Yakima. Tonight's my last night."

Perfect. Like, unreasonably perfect. Somebody's obviously looking out for me.

"And what brings you to this party?" I say.

She hesitates for a beat. "I want to try new things."

I feel her hot breath on my cheek, and I turn my head to find her gazing up at me. There's a fiery glint in her eyes. "Yeah?"

Zoey nods. I feel her hand creep up the back of my neck, into my hair, which sends a violent shiver down my spine.

"Then can I get you a drink?"

We practically crash through the door to an unknown somebody's bedroom, our hands scouring one another's clothes for their off-buttons. I channel all of my willpower to sever our knotted lips for a moment to lock the door behind us and remove her blouse using the buttons, instead of tearing it to shreds. Her mouth laps at my neck while I fumble with the final button and sling the shirt to the floor, then I smother her lips with my own as I work on the buckle of her jeans.

I have to help her with my dress, but once I've pulled that over my head, we're standing in bras and underwear, scanning each other's bare bodies like we've momentarily forgotten why we're here. I let her make the first move, to confirm that she wants this, and she does, stepping over the bundle of clothes and kissing me with force, gripping my hips and guiding me backwards until I fall onto the bed that I hadn't even registered was behind me.

We toss and turn on the sheets, gradually pulling at bra straps and panties, removing the final thin barriers of our most sensitive areas. I pin Zoey to the bed and raise my head for air, gape down at her face lit only by the moon shining through the window. Her hazel eyes search mine, as if imploring to keep going, so I push backwards with my knees and lower my head to her groin.

My tongue goes to work, starting slow, teasing, but soon she's clawing at my hair, moaning loudly, urging me to dig deeper. It takes a few minutes, but her body jolts to life and shudders, sinks into the sheets as I lift my head and pant, saliva and juices dripping off my tongue.

But she springs back up in seconds, kissing me and whispering, "your turn."

I roll off of her and she hovers above me, wasting no time, darting between my legs and beginning to mimic my every move.

You would have to be a real evil, selfish, moronic piece of shit to repeat what I do next.

I'm propped up on my elbows, watching her go down on me, but eventually she breaks eye contact and her face is no longer visible, buried in my skin. All I see is the top of her head. Brunette.

My head tilts back, my breaths become heavier. A thousand memories ricochet around my mind, poisoning it.

"Mabel," I moan. The sensation in my crotch lessens, her movement becomes slower. "Mabel," I whisper, and I'm about to tell her not to stop when I realize what I've done.

Zoey looks up at me, her eyebrows drawn together. Totally crestfallen. I swallow a dagger of guilt and say her name, her *actual* name, but she's already standing up and reaching for the box of tissues on the dresser to cleanse herself of this memory.

I sit up fast enough to trigger whiplash and call for her to come back. "I'm sorry," I tell her.

"It's fine," she says flatly, pulling up her jeans. "If there's somebody you'd rather be with right now, that's fine."

"But there isn't, I promise. Please, Zoey, I really like you, Mabel's just... someone I used to know, she doesn't mean anything." I stand up, move towards her, but she holds up her hand, her blouse half-unbuttoned.

"Pacifica, stop. I'm not- I'm not gonna be a... a prop, in your fantasy, okay? I'm sorry. I know this wasn't going to turn into anything serious, I know, but I don't want- I don't want to be *that*. I'm sorry."

My arms collapse at my sides as she slips out of the room, before I can tell her that there is no universe in which she should be sorry.

Four

A knock on the door, and I slammed the laptop shut, my heart ramming into my ribcage.

In the summer that I was fifteen, I was starting to watch a lot more pornography.

There were *troves* of it, just sitting there, on the internet, for free, and I could find something new and load a full twenty-minute video in a matter of seconds. Even if I exclusively watched porn, video after video without breaks, right up until I was lowered into the grave, I estimated that I wouldn't get through a tenth of what was out there.

That day, my voyage across the ocean of X-rated websites had landed me in a lesbian category. It was something that I had often seen down the side of the page, constantly offering itself to whoever might be interested, but I had never clicked any of the blurry thumbnails, until that day, when curiosity must have gotten the better of me.

I found it kinda gross. I was fine with the kissing, and the nudity, because I'd seen it all on-screen before, but when they started to get down to business I decided that it just didn't make sense - they were trying to have sex without either of them possessing one of the two things that make sex work. They were using their hands, but that meant their fingers got all sticky, and yet they still found it necessary to rub them all over one another's skin and hair, spreading goo to every nook of their bodies. The redhead was just about to set her tongue to work on the blonde's nether region - which was all kinds of weird - when I was interrupted.

There was another knock on the door, and my mom called my name through the wood. I realized I had been sat cross-legged with my pants pulled down and the image of two girls going at it burned into my eyeballs.

"Yeah - coming," I shouted, jumping out of bed and frantically tugging my sweatpants back up. I opened my bedroom door and Mom had disappeared, so I jogged down the stairs and found her watching TV in the living room. "What?" I asked her.

"Somebody was asking for you at the door."

"Okay," I said, pointedly scanning the hallway. "Where are they?"

She blinked at me, like I was braindead. "At the door."

"You didn't let them in?"

Again with the slow, deliberate blink. Before you start worrying that my mom was mentally ill, or anything, don't. She was just very much obsessed with herself, and held herself above the kind of social norms that you might expect and appreciate from a regular human being. I rolled my eyes and traipsed to the front door.

The first thing I saw was a flip-flops and jeans combo, so my visitor had bad fashion sense, then I saw a baggy blue and pink sweater, so they obviously had *terrible* fashion sense, but then I noticed that it was Mabel Pines, and I dropped the charges, because generally, Mabel Pines was pretty fantastic. My jaw dropped open.

"Surprise!" she squealed, throwing her arms out to the side.

"What?! What are you doing here?" I exclaimed, stepping out onto the concrete porch and

wrapping her up in a hug. "I didn't think you were getting here until next weekend."

"Yeah, well, I lied to you. Just so I could see the look on your face," she said, prodding me on the nose and waltzing past, into the house.

We didn't have much to catch up on, because we had texted each other daily since the last summer's end, but we still sat on my bed and talked for hours. It was surreal at first, like I had never expected her to come back, but there she was anyway, her braces gleaming in the sunbeams and her laugh bouncing off my walls.

"I can't believe you're here," I kept telling her, and the warm feeling bubbling inside of me wanted to say more, but I felt that it would be out of character, so I didn't.

Things carried on like that for the rest of June. We were thick as thieves, spending our days exploring the forest around her uncle's tourist trap, spending our evenings in the attic or in my bedroom, playing the piano, watching romcoms, going on those chat-roulette sites and plowing through thousands of penises just to find another couple of youngsters to talk to, sometimes on the other side of the globe.

Mabel wasn't like any other teenager I knew in Gravity Falls. She woke up early on summer days, for a start, and when she stepped outside and inhaled the morning air she didn't think about hitting the mall, or heading to the local park to smoke cigarettes on a picnic bench and scare away children, or turn around and go back to bed. She just strolled into the woods and let adventure come to her.

I wasn't so into it, all that nature and shit, but she had a manner of making it fun, and I couldn't even tell you what that was. I think it was just her. She had a positive reaction to everything that happened, everything that she saw, no matter how trivial, like a squirrel dropping acorns from the trees or a wooden fort that some kids had abandoned half-built, and it was infectious. I'd roll my eyes and tell her how dumb she was and complain about the mud on my boots, but every time she looked away I'd smile or laugh under my breath.

Each day we ventured farther into the forest, until eventually we came to the edge of the lake and found an old fishing platform, adjoining what might have once been a parking lot, but was now overgrown with ferns. Mabel walked right out onto the platform, despite the wooden planks looking aged and rotted at the sides, and I stood back on the dirt, half of me wanting to reach out and pull her back, but half of me cracking up at the thought of her falling into the water fully-clothed.

She reached the end, jumped a few times, her sneakers pounding the wood and echoing out across the otherwise still lake. I flinched.

"It's fine," she called out. "Quit being such a baby," and I wasn't a baby, but I did succumb to peer pressure exceptionally easily.

I walked up next to her, gazed out across the water. Way out in the distance to my left was an uninhabited island that I'd never set foot on, and about the same distance to my right was the beach that the boats docked at and the townspeople fished from. Out here, we stood in silence, save for the birds chirping and the ripples of the lake, and our breathing. We declared the dock 'our spot,' we weren't ever to bring anybody else here. And I was more than fine with that.

But July fourth came around, and we went down to the fireworks stand that was set up in the parking lot of the convenience store every year, and we convinced Mabel's uncle to shell out for a spectacular display in their back yard, but all the while, Mabel was getting all buddy-buddy with

this boy she had made friends with, who I didn't know about until a minute before he showed up at her uncle's house.

Andrew, was his name. He had Harry-Potter glasses and neat, gelled, dark brown hair, and I had to stare at the back of his head as we walked to the convenience store, his arm linked with Mabel's. They kept whispering things to one another. She kept nudging him with her elbow. He kept making her laugh. We had Wendy Corduroy and her boyfriend-of-the-month along with us too, and they were hanging back, probably pretending they weren't chilling out with an old man and a bunch of high school freshmen, so I was left to talk to Dipper.

It's not that I didn't like Dipper. He was cool, and nice to me, and I had long overcome my crush on him from the summer before. It's just that, with Mabel repeatedly throwing her head back in laughter, making her pigtails bob up and down, while I couldn't hear a word of the comedy genius that Andrew must have spouting, it was hard to concentrate on Dipper's anecdotes.

Sorry, Dipper. Some girls just don't care about alien spaceships, no matter how many of them you claim to have seen.

We hauled a few backpacks full of fireworks back to the Mystery Shack - Stan Pines' house-slash-gift-shop - and sat around out the front eating barely-cooked hot dogs off of the barbecue, soaking up the last of the sun before it was due to rain for a week straight. It disappeared behind the treeline, then the horizon, and then we were into those hours of the day where my tank top and denim skirt weren't defending me from the wind, so Mabel ran into the house and brought me one of her hoodies. I didn't even have to ask. But then she went back to the tree stump that Andrew was sitting on, and I wanted to fire up the barbecue again and burn the shit out of that hoodie, just for attention.

I told myself to calm down, stop being so insanely possessive, and actually try to get to know the guy. Maybe he would turn out to have a hideous personality and I could warn Mabel away from him.

But he was really, really, *really* sweet. I perched on the stump next to him while Mabel ran around with her brother organizing the fireworks, and he told me how he lived with his grandparents because his parents died when he was young. He told me that his grandma was in the early stages of dementia and that he was going to learn to drive as soon as he turned fifteen so he could take her to her doctors' appointments, instead of his grandpa, whose body was less able than it used to be. He was due to start his freshman year at the same school as me in September, and he was really glad to have found Mabel because none of his friends were around for the summer.

I wasn't as pleasant a human being as Andrew was, I decided later that night, because I hatched a little scheme to get back at Mabel for all the jealousy she had indirectly caused me throughout the afternoon. Wendy and her boyfriend, *Klaus* - German, I think - were getting touchy-feely on the old couch on the porch, and sitting right next to Dipper, I could tell how uncomfortable he was, his eyes flicking to and from the pair like a metronome on steroids. I saw an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone, I suppose, although I'm not sure either of those birds needed to be killed in the first place.

"You've really got a thing for her, haven't you?" I said.

Dipper looked at me, his cheeks flushed under the light from the porch, and sat up straight in the plastic chair. "No."

I raised one eyebrow, tapped my foot restlessly against the dirt.

"Okay, yes," he said. "But don't tell her."

"I won't," I said, and I wouldn't. I wasn't a monster. Well, I wasn't a monster when it came to doing things that I didn't personally gain anything from. "You wanna make out?"

"What?"

"With me. Do you want to make out with me? It would make it easy as shit to find out if Wendy likes you back."

He thought about it for a moment, and then, right there, on our crappy little plastic chairs, he leaned in.

I slapped his knee. "Not now. After the fireworks."

"Oh," he said, and pulled the bill of his cap lower.

The sky faded to black, and the stars came out. While Stan used one of those long grill lighters to light the first fuse, I watched Mabel, standing further back than the rest of us, her hands held up to her chest and tucked into the sleeves of her sweater, eyeing the box on the ground with distrust. I was half-hoping she would come over and stand next to me, and over the explosions whisper wishes in my ear, but I wasn't sure she even remembered last year on the balcony.

There was a whistle, and everyone flinched slightly, but I didn't take my eyes off of Mabel and her new best friend until the third explosion. I watched their eyes shoot upwards, and their faces turn green, and then purple.

We used the best of the fireworks first, it seemed, so the very last box sputtered out pitiful sparks that barely made it above our shins. It may as well have sprung out a giant middle finger and laughed at us. While everyone began to applaud, and laugh, and discuss what to do differently next year, I dragged Dipper by the hand around the side of the Mystery Shack, where we were still barely visible and the conversation became a low hum to our ears. He didn't say anything, because he knew what I was doing, but I felt the need to remind him quietly that this wouldn't mean anything, and he nodded. I plucked the cap from his head and gasped into his mouth because he didn't waste any time.

We made out with my back pressed against the hard exterior of the Shack for a few minutes, and I'm not sure who ended it. We both pulled away for air at the same time, and everyone would have seen us by now, so we stopped, but for a split second, I contemplated pulling him back for round two. He was *good*, more so than any of the boys I had dated from school, more so than anyone would have thought just by looking at his nerdy outer shell. And maybe Wendy would eventually wise up, because he sure smelled a lot nicer than *Klaus*.

Dipper smiled down at me, tapped the wood above my head a couple of times, for no discernible reason, perhaps to signal that the moment was over, perhaps to kill the silence. Then he walked back to the group, and I lingered against the wall, a forest of shadows opening up before me without his body to block the view.

Maybe in another life we could have been something. But no matter how good he was at kissing, there was something wrong. Something missing. And in the black canvas of the forest, the blonde and the redhead from that one video crawled into my mind, played with one another in front of me, tugged at each other's lips with their teeth. My eyes widened on their own accord, then squeezed shut. I shook my head violently and hurried back to the front porch.

It didn't rain after all, because weather forecasts in my hometown have always been beyond inaccurate. My dad always said it was because the local news station's weatherman was of Pakistani descent, and he stood no chance of predicting the weather if he "can't even speak English properly." My mom always slapped his arm with a magazine when he said that, which was about the proudest I ever felt of her.

The day after our lackluster fireworks display, Mabel and I found our way back to the fishing dock - our spot - kicking pinecones and laughing at each other's embarrassing childhood memories, the kind of stories that were too long to tell over text messages. We each slumped against opposite wooden posts jutting out of the water, my left leg straightened out parallel to her right, our bare knees touching.

The tranquility of the place consumed our conversation, and a few minutes later, hypnotized by the sun dancing on the surface of the water, Mabel's voice startled me a little.

"So what's going on with you and my brother?" she asked, and when I turned to look at her she raised her eyebrows with her mouth in a straight line. I wasn't sure if this was going to be a friendly inquisition or a waterboarding.

"Nothing," I told her. "He asked me to kiss him to make Wendy jealous."

She frowned, tilted her head, which was her response to so many things that I didn't know how to interpret it anymore.

"And I like kissing people, so I said yeah, why not?"

"Alright," she shrugged. "Did it work?"

"I dunno. Don't really care. What we *should* be talking about is where did this *Andrew* come from and why were you all over him yesterday?"

She hummed and leaned her head back against the post. "Isn't he great? He's so sweet. I met him at the pool last week and we were like, bam, insta-friends. He's starting at your school this year, you know."

"Are you... into him?"

"Andrew? He's gay," she said, chuckling, as if that was supposed to be obvious and I was dumb for not knowing.

I went into robot-on-standby mode while I re-evaluated everything I had witnessed the day before, all the touching, and the giggling, and felt all the frustration I had tucked away slowly fizzle out.

"You... do know what gay means, right?"

"Yes, I know what *gay* means," I snapped.

"And you're cool with that, right?" she asked me with her eyebrows drawn together and her head lowered, like she was the fucking ambassador of the gay community and I would be hanged on the end of this very dock if I didn't jump up and start waving a rainbow flag around.

"Of course I'm cool with it," and I was, I think, because I imagined Andrew kissing another dude and it didn't freak me out.

"I'm gonna make it my summer mission to find him a cute boyfriend," she said.

I hesitated, then like a mooney six-year-old said, "I guess that means you'll be spending a lot of time with him," at which point the ball seemed to drop for Mabel.

"Is that what you're worried about?" she laughed, rising to her feet, and just as I thought she was going to walk away without me, she cuddled up against my post and lay her head on my shoulder. "Andrew can't hold a candle to you."

I gazed down into her silky hair, picked a leaf fragment out of it instinctively. "I know that," I said, a smug grin devouring my face, but as I sat there and thought about it, about Andrew taking care of his grandparents and donating his allowance to orphanages, there wasn't anything I could think of for him to hold up his candle to.

The summer flew by, as summers often do. I spent so much time outdoors that whenever I returned to my room at the end of the day I felt all claustrophobic, several times a night going out to the balcony and breathing in the air, staring out across the pines, looking up at the stars when the sky was clear and memorizing the few constellations I could see. I also, predictably, spent so much time with Mabel that those nights came hand-in-hand with anxiety, because soon she would be shipped back down to California and my old, habitual life would resume, and I knew I would get used to it again, I had to, but god, I wished she could have stuck around just a while longer, just until Christmas, or until next summer, or until I died.

I got to know Andrew a little better, we both did, but he didn't like leaving his grandparents at home alone for hours at a time, so he wasn't always around.

The last thing about that summer that stuck in my head was towards the end, one of the final days in August. The temperature was dropping, giving way to autumn, but Mabel in a sweater, me in my purple fleece, we were fine. After dark, we grabbed a couple of sleeping bags and pillows from the seemingly all-encompassing supply closet in the Mystery Shack, a flashlight from the attic, a jumbo bag of chips from the kitchen, four cans of Diet Coke, and we walked close together through the woods, Mabel waving the flashlight around all *Blair-Witch-Project*-like.

At the fishing dock, we rolled out the sleeping bags side-by-side. It made me a little anxious that our pillows touched the edge of the dock, but unless I managed to accidentally spring into a backflip from lying down, I wasn't going to fall in the water. Mabel hung the flashlights from one of the posts, but couldn't really control the direction of the light, so we lay on the dock, all wrapped up with our arms touching through the thick lining of the sleeping bags, and our feet brightly illuminated. Every time we turned our heads to look at one another, the light hit her chin and cast sinister shadows over her face, and fully aware of this, she kept laughing in a deep voice and threatening to throw me into the lake, which I hated.

I always felt like I drifted in and out of consciousness during our conversations, so sometimes we would end up talking about something and I wouldn't remember how we got there. Over the sound of crickets, nesting in the reeds surrounding the lake, Mabel was telling me about the *three* different boyfriends she had allured over the last year, which I had heard all about before, but not in this much detail. She was rambling, hyped up on caffeine.

I found it kind of uncomfortable, which was strange. It wasn't because I had only dated two boys myself - there was initially a *tiny* bit of jealousy, and questioning what I was doing wrong, but I was over it. And I had *thought* that I only didn't like seeing her with Andrew because it meant she was spending time without me, focusing her attention on somebody that wasn't me. Me, me, me.

But listening to how Chance could tie a knot in a cherry stem with his tongue, how Billy was a star running back and he was only in sophomore year, it all really bothered me. From the descriptions she gave me, I was picturing those boys in my head, cuddling up to Mabel, kissing Mabel, and I wanted to reach into my imagination and ram my fist down their throats. Which didn't seem like a healthy thing to be thinking. I was very protective of her, I supposed.

I woke up to a clear sky, to birds chirping, to the water lapping at the dock's supports, and I sat up, saw the brunette sleeping silently beside me, her breath tickling my hand.

At first I thought it was still evening, the sky indigo and the air chilly, but that couldn't have been right, because we were stargazing only moments ago. I leaned forward, not willing to emerge from my warm cocoon just yet, and grabbed the backpack at the foot of our makeshift bed. I rummaged around for my phone, and it struck my eyes, full brightness, but I squinted and read that it was 5:30 A.M. I looked around again, like I somehow knew better than the clock, because it definitely looked like twilight outside, but then I had this crazy revelation that it also probably looked like that in the early hours of the morning, I was just never awake to witness it.

"Mabel," I croaked, and then cleared my throat a couple of times because I sounded on the brink of death and it wasn't the least bit attractive. "Mabel," I repeated, shaking her arm.

She woke with a start, sprang upright, and our heads almost clashed. She looked around, at the woods, the lake, our sleeping bags, her mind ticking through the same thought pattern as mine had. "What time is it?"

"Five-thirty."

"Oh *shoot*, we've been out here all night? Dude."

Her phone had thirty-seven missed calls and sixteen messages from five different people. It made me frown and check my own, but I had nothing. I even unlocked it and went into the Messages app, just in case they hadn't popped up on my home screen. I turned it off and switched it back on again. Nada.

Mabel got onto the phone with her uncle, who picked up right away. I wasn't paying much attention, but he sounded more relieved than pissed off, and then she called Dipper, who was also awake, and I couldn't hear him very well because he speaks so quietly into the receiver, like everything he's saying is top secret and he's not even sure he should be declaring it out loud. Then she fired off a few texts. I lay back on my pillow and studied the sky, anger consuming me. The sleeping bag felt more like a furnace now, burning me alive.

I was aware of Mabel rummaging around in her own bed and standing up, and then a loud splash split the silence, and I turned my head to glance across the dock, and she was gone. Forever paranoid, my first thought was that she had fallen in and was now drowning, but as I rushed to the end of the dock my foot got tangled up in her t-shirt, and her face came into view, and I saw that she was not drowning, she had just gone totally fucking nuts and decided that stripping down to her bra and underpants and jumping into a lake before the sun had come up was a fine thing to do.

She bobbed in the water, grinning up at me.

"The hell are you doing?" I asked her, folding my arms across my chest because just the thought of being in there made me shiver.

"Haven't you always wanted to wake up and go for a swim, before you do anything else?"

I glanced across the lake, at the cliffs and the forest on the other side, I guess to check if anybody was watching. "No?"

"Well, it feels great. They have these hotel rooms now where the bed is in the middle of a swimming pool, so you have to take a dip every time you get up. It looks incredible."

"That sounds... horribly impractical."

Mabel inched forward and folded her arms over the edge of the wood, splashing my bare toes. For a moment she just looked at me, that smile plastered to her face, the sign of her inner deviant working away, plotting her next moves. She held out her hand, palm to the sky.

"I'm not getting in there," I told her.

"Yeah, you are."

"No, I'm really not."

"Pacifica, I can't see into the future, but if I could, I would see you stepping into this lake, on this beautiful morning."

I crouched down and dipped my toe in. It actually wasn't too bad, if you completely changed your definition of not-too-bad. It was fucking freezing.

But then Mabel added, "one of the few mornings we have left," and I thought screw it, I would be as compulsive as she was for once.

I folded my clothes in a neat pile and left them on the sleeping bags, because I wasn't going to scatter them about the dock and get them all dirty like some kind of animal. My feet tingled as I sat on the lip, my legs dangling into the water, and I kept withdrawing them until Mabel convinced me to just jump in without thinking about it.

So I did, and once my head was above the surface again, I started cursing profusely and blinking water out of my eyes. At first, the water felt like a block of ice, but I flapped my arms around like a toddler without armbands and that warmed me up. Mabel bet me that she could beat me to a rock further along the shore.

"I doubt that," I told her.

"People say I have mermaid blood."

"I have no idea what that's supposed to mean, but people say *I* was the school's champion of the 500 meter freestyle two years running. Because I was."

"Yeah," she said, paddling closer, right up to my face. She tilted her head and clucked her tongue. "But people say you're also full of shit."

My mouth dropped open. "Oh, you are *so* on."

We stayed in the lake for about an hour, until the sky turned blue. I walked back to the Mystery Shack with Mabel, and stayed there until that evening, when my mom finally called to ask where I had gotten to, with only the tiniest hint of concern. Mabel kept me occupied the whole time, never letting quiet drape over us, and I think she knew what was wrong, I think she had seen my phone

earlier on the dock and that was why she started distracting me. Helping me with my problems without declaring them out loud, which I genuinely appreciated, more so than I would ever vocalize.

It was some time in the afternoon, when we were sat on her bed, filling out one of those online personality quizzes, that I decided that she knew me better than anybody, because I tended not to let people know me at all. She knew my hopes and fears and strengths and weaknesses, all of me, the real me, the girl behind the designer sunglasses and the paragon of make-up. And she didn't judge the real me, or put me down, or poke fun - all of the things that intimidated me about opening up to the world.

I had never had a friend like that, and it made it that much harder to say goodbye once September rolled around.

Five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

For a few minutes every morning, the sun beams through the top of our living room window, assaulting the spot on the couch that my head lies whenever I've crashed out there the night before. This is all because the window has an arched top, and whoever fitted the blinds didn't consider that we might have wanted them tall enough to fit the whole window. We haven't done anything about it, because when I fall asleep without setting an alarm, those obnoxious rays are the only way I'm waking up the next day.

Today they are blinding me at 10:40 A.M., and my shift started at 10, and I'm cuddled up to an empty bottle of scotch.

I sit up, which is a mistake, according to my pounding head, but I power through it and trudge to the kitchen. I pour a glass of water under the medicine cabinet, and I don't even have to look to retrieve a bottle of aspirin, which I suppose speaks volumes for how routine this is. My shower takes three minutes, but I don't have time to straighten my hair so I put it up in a bun and throw on my uniform. I avoid the mirror, because if I see how much of a wreck I surely look, I'm not going to make it beyond the front door.

I power-walk to the edge of town and make it to Greasy's at 11:10. For some reason I decide to enter through the side door, like if I slip into the office undetected Lindsay will think I've been here the whole time. She's at the counter, pouring coffee, glaring at me, and that is *not* a good look for Lindsay, and certainly not a look she has to try on very often. I pass the gauntlet of occupied booths and step behind the counter.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Go home," she says, her voice low. "You're not working today."

"Yeah, I switched my shifts with Beth," I tell her.

"Not what I mean. I told you there would be consequences if this happened again, didn't I?" She goes back to working on the drinks order and I lean against the counter for balance.

"Yeah," I sigh. "I'm sorry, I overslept."

"Nina's away again? Is that it?"

My mouth opens and shuts a couple of times. She's smart. See-right-through-you smart.

"I've told you *so many times* that my door is open to you, any hour of the night. You have my phone number, you know where I live, and have you ever called? No. I don't know what else I can do. I'm running out of options with you."

Being scolded by Lindsay is a lot different to being scolded by Mom. With Mom it's like, whatever, get out of my face, and I'll blow my fringe out of my eyes because I don't care what she has to say, but with Lindsay? I want to get down on my knees and sob into her apron.

"I'll close up tonight," I try. "You can leave early."

"No."

"I'll take all of these tables right now. You can have a break."

"No. You're not working today."

"So you're angry at me for missing an hour of work, but now you want me to miss the whole day? How are you going to handle every table by yourself? We're packed."

"I will manage, just how I've managed for the last hour without you. And you *know* this isn't about you missing work, so don't try and twist my words. If you're not going to accept my help, Pacifica, then I'm not going to pay to fuel your addiction. It's as simple as that."

There's a lump in my throat that threatens to burst if I stand here any longer, so I mumble, "okay," and make a beeline for the door.

"Such a shame," I hear Lindsay say behind me.

I'm walking back across the parking lot, squeezing between a red sedan and a pick-up, and a single tear rolls down my cheek. It's like being back in elementary school and doing something so unthinkable that the sweetest teacher snaps and yells at you, it ignites the kind of shame that burns in you all day and doesn't go away until they smile at you again, so you know your relationship hasn't been permanently damaged.

When I'm back at the apartment I go to dispose of the scotch bottle, but decide against it. At AA, they've told me that when my sponsor is away and I relapse I have to be honest with her, so I leave the bottle on the coffee table, a lovely surprise to ruin her weekend when she gets home tonight.

And then I'm just alone with my thoughts, and that's about as dangerous as jamming my hand into the blender and cranking the dial up to max, so I go outside for a run.

There's a carnival set up in town, in one of the big open fields near my old high school, a helter-skelter and a ferris wheel towering over it all, broadcasting one of those generic carnival tunes. I give it a wide berth because it's exactly the kind of place that Mabel Pines might spend a Sunday afternoon. The kind of place she'd try to sneak onto the slide that's strictly for kids twelve years of age and younger.

And the thought of her reminds me of Zoey, a blur of purple and blue, pink lips and soft skin. I think about how she could have been something new - not permanent - but a flicker of romance, at least, and how I ruined it with perversion and an inability to forget my past. How it's possible that she is figuring out her sexuality, and I'll forever be her first experience with a woman, a disaster, how I might get in the way of her future curiosity because I left my dirty footprint on her mind, because I'm no better than any of the opportunistic men that were prowling the party last night.

My legs feel too weak to run. I bend over on the sidewalk and tighten my eyes shut, willing myself not to be sick, the carnival music and children's laughter mocking me in the distance. It's these sorts of moments that I make vows to myself, promises to make myself better, so that Hurricane Pacifica can't wreak any more havoc, but they're always hollow promises. I never follow through.

Today's going to be different, I decide, and it's a shame the music supporting this epiphany is a carny xylophone and not an epic orchestra. I'm going to take concrete action. I'm going to get my shit together. I'm going to prove to myself and everyone who knows me that I'm a strong, independent woman, a mature adult who tackles their problems head-on instead of letting them fester.

I'm going to... run home to my mom.

By five in the afternoon, I'm standing outside the spacious two-story house where I spent my teenage years. I drop my backpack on the concrete pathway, stand a few steps back from the door, just scanning the overgrown yard, the broken wooden bench. The house itself doesn't look any different, but if you threw a rock through a front-facing window you might think it was unoccupied from the street.

It must be six months since I've visited. Christmas. I have avoided traveling down this street and getting a passing glance at the place, but not consciously. I don't think.

Mom answers the door after two attempts at the bell and thirty seconds, and she looks like she's about to berate her cold-caller about it being Sunday evening, but when she recognizes me, her face lights up in exactly the way I wish it did when I was a child, when I would have actually appreciated that sort of gesture.

"Pacifica," she says, smiling, and I can see she has been practicing her smile, at least. "What a lovely surprise."

"Hey, mom."

"How are you?" she asks, leaning in for a tentative hug which I tentatively reciprocate.

"I'm fine. Thought I'd come and hang out for a while," I say, revealing my backpack.

"Are you staying the night?"

"If that's okay with you, yeah."

"Oh," she says, clapping her hands together. "I'll have to make your bed. I just washed the sheets this morning - you know me, I have to keep everything clean in your room even if you haven't lived there for years!"

"You do? That's... weird," I say, but she's already prancing away through the living room. I follow her through to the sunroom, and notice that the back yard is as overgrown as out front.

"Ever since I fired the maid, I've been working overtime keeping everything spotless in here. I love it, it's so satisfying. Makes me wonder why we ever paid so much to have little men in suits running about doing everything for us."

"Looks like you could still do with a gardener."

"Oh, don't get me started on that. *Ridiculous* how much they're charging these days. It used to be, we'd come down to the neighborhood and find a couple of Mexicans" - she whispers *Mexicans*, as if that makes it any less offensive - "and they'd charge five dollars an hour, tops. It isn't artistry, I just want the fucking lawn mowed."

Mom makes dinner, and I try to think back to the last time that happened, and nope, it has not happened in my lifetime. Even at Christmas, she invites Mrs. Weathers, the widowed elderly neighbor to our table, and I try and try to give my mom the benefit of the doubt and tell myself she is being generous to the lonely out of Christmas spirit, not because Mrs. Weathers was once a professional chef. Mom tells me she bought this new cookbook online, over two-hundred recipes. She loves cooking, she keeps saying from the kitchen, but it's the first I've heard of it. I sit patiently

at the dining table, half-listening to her, half-scrolling through my Twitter feed for anything remotely interesting. I wonder if Mrs. Weathers will get an invite this year.

Eventually, I am served a plate of vegetable ravioli, a tomato sauce over the top sprinkled with finely chopped chili peppers, and green beans on the side. Probably the healthiest meal I've eaten in weeks, considering I live off of diner food and whenever I'm sensible enough to have a salad I mix in a bag of potato chips, to balance out the lack of flavor. Wendy doesn't understand how I'm not fat, she always tells me.

"This is delicious," I say after one mouthful, more as a gut reaction than anything.

"You like it?" she says, glancing up from the opposite end of the table, her eyes bright. "I'm so glad. I never get the chance to cook for other people. You'll have to come to dinner more often."

There, in that last sentence, lies the overarching quandary of our relationship. She lives here alone, in this vast space, and yeah, maybe it would be nice if her daughter paid her a visit that wasn't to ask for a favor, every once in a while. But every time Mom says things like this, something within me ignites and I want to spit back at her that maybe she should have come to my piano recitals more often, or my swim meets, or maybe she shouldn't have gone entire days without saying a word to me or asking how I was, simply because she was so wrapped up in her own life. Just because her loneliness has broken her doesn't mean I have to be around to pick up the pieces.

I roll my shoulders and focus on the food. No need to start an argument now, because I'd be running up the stairs to grab my backpack and then I would be out of here, no closer to the goal of fixing my life. I divert the conversation to the reason I'm sat here in the first place. "Mom, you need to stop sending me money."

"What? How come?"

"Let's just say... I haven't been spending it very wisely. I buy a lot of things I don't need."

"What about the apartment? How are you going to afford rent?"

"Well, uh, that's still coming out of Dad's money, isn't it? We still need that. I just mean the money you transfer to me every month."

She frowns and sets down her knife and fork. Never a good sign. "Are you sure you can get by without it? And are you sure that woman at the diner is paying you enough? I looked online, and I'm fairly confident that the minimum wage for-"

"My pay is fine, Mom. I make enough to live on with tips. I might have to switch to a less expensive shampoo, or something, but I'll be fine. Please trust me on this, it'll be good for me to gain a little independence. Just, you know, I still need Dad to pay for the apartment."

She chews on the pasta, eyes drilling into me, trying to figure me out. We have sat in these exact seats in the opposite situation at least once before, when I was asking for a raise. I was most likely drunk. "Well, if you say so, dear. Just let me know the moment you start to struggle, okay? If that happens. I don't want you starving up there just to hang on to your pride."

In spite of everything, I smile. "Thank you."

And totally out of nowhere, she says, "any young ladies in your life?"

I swallow my food too quickly and grimace, waiting for it to squeeze through my throat. "Not at the moment, no."

My bedroom is exactly the way I remember, and I can't work out whether that's a good thing. It's midnight, and the moon is bright, so every little feature, every little trinket, every memory is coated in pale light, and it's keeping me awake. Every time I shut my eyes, my mind takes over, playing scenes that happened within these four walls, and most of them feature Mabel. In some, we're dancing. I'm playing the piano. She's knitting. Or we're just lying here, in my bed, talking about the future, neither of us knowing at the time what fate would have in store for us.

I jump out of bed and guide myself to the piano in the corner. A strip of moonlight from a gap in the curtains cuts across the sleek black exterior. I sit at the stool and my fingers naturally assume the stance they took thousands of times in my childhood. I think about Mozart, *A Little Night Music*. My hands tap the keys like it's second nature, but my mom is asleep so I'm not actually playing the notes, so, who knows, I could be getting it totally wrong. She really has been obsessive with cleaning; there isn't even a layer of dust on the keys to show that this is just another aspect of my life I abandoned a long time ago. About three years. When I started drinking, I guess.

While the ghost of my former self and the girl I used to know dance around my bedroom, I go downstairs and sleep on the couch.

Over the week, I gradually rekindle Lindsay's love for me by coming to work early and staying late, to help keep the place clean. I tell her that all of my tips are going straight into the piggy bank and that I'm not replacing the bottle I had stashed under the sink, and I'm not lying. Nina knows about that spot now, anyway.

I also tell Lindsay that I might have found somebody to fill the job vacancy, but Mabel doesn't show up at the diner all week.

Until Saturday night, about a half hour before closing time. We're completely empty, so I'm winding down with a milkshake and a newspaper at the counter, Bob Seger on low volume from the digital jukebox in the corner. The bell above the door chimes and I see her sink into the closest booth, her fiancé and two other guys following suit. It takes all of two seconds to spot that they're all wasted.

But as much as I may want to, when I'm working alone it's impossible to avoid customers, so I take a couple of steadying breaths and march over to the booth. I have to wait for Jason and the goon opposite him to stop talking before they all shift their attention to me. Mabel smiles; I do not.

"Good evening, can I get you guys some drinks?"

The third guy, opposite Mabel, has black bangs that partially obscure his eyes, but they look like somebody has spilled a vat of grease over his head. I try not to twist my nose at the beer breath as he asks for four Jack and Cokes and a bottle of red, which the other men at the table think is a riot.

"We don't serve alcohol here," I say, the rehearsed line for every joker that has ever thought that would be a cute thing to ask.

They talk among themselves like they've forgotten I'm here, or that they're even in a diner, until Jason says, "I'll have some of that... what's that thick bread called that you have with syrup?"

"French toast?" says his buddy, the good-looking one.

"No, that's not it, it's, uhh..."

"It's called French toast, dude."

"Yeah, I'll have some of that."

None of the others say anything, and Mabel is much more interested in her fingernails, so I leave them to shout at each other over the silence, and reluctantly set down a plate of French toast in front of the Neanderthal that Mabel has apparently decided to marry.

And not five minutes later, I'm standing over the vacated table, half-eaten French toast left behind, searching for the six dollars it should have cost. I check the seats, the floor, the napkin dispenser. To my right, out the window, the four of them are just crossing the parking lot towards the trail that leads into town. I consider letting it go. But something is boiling in my chest. We'll call it fury, or just that I'm downright confounded as to how somebody I once loved to bits has ended up with a baboon like Jason.

I burst out the door, a gust of cool air attacking my fringe, and across the empty lot yell, "hey!"

They all turn around in unison as I strut across the gravel in my blue high heels, which isn't easy, and I'm sure my occasional wobble from side to side makes me look as intimidating as a Labrador pup.

"Generally, you're supposed to pay for food," I say. "This isn't a homeless shelter. Though a couple of you look like you could pass as tramps." My mouth stops there.

Mabel looks up at her boyfriend and her jaw drops open. "You didn't leave any money?"

"It was crap food," he slurs, running a hand through his hair. "They should have paid me to eat it."

"I'm sorry," I say, hands on hips. "If you wanted free food you can feel free to rummage through our dumpster. Like I said, you wouldn't look very out of place."

His friends laugh and taunt him for a second and then turn to retreat into the woods. Jason's face turns more serious. "Alright," he says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a scuffed leather wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

"Five ninety-nine," I tell him, and as I go to reach for the bill he drops it to the ground on purpose.

"Whoops."

"Oh, what is this, middle school? Do you wanna go back inside and dunk my head in the toilet, too?"

"Hey, if that's what you're into."

I grimace and turn to Mabel, whose arms are folded. Her face softens as I glare at her, like she's trying to apologize with her eyes but isn't sorry enough to do anything.

"You're just gonna stand there?"

One of the douchebags calls out of the darkness, "are you guys coming, or what?"

"Figures," I say, directly to Mabel. "You always were spineless."

"Mabel, how do you know this chick?" Jason asks her, eyeing me from head to toe.

"Can we just go, please?" she says, grabbing his arm, her eyes fixed on me. I see a flurry of shame

and humiliation behind them.

I stand there in the empty lot, frozen still, watching their backs fade into the pitch black woods. The ten-dollar bill rests at my feet, unmoving in the still night. Without really thinking about what I'm doing, I lift my heel and stomp it into the gravel, over and over, until my leg is tired and the weight of my frustration is lifted. I look around; no passers-by to witness my meltdown. An owl hoots somewhere in the distance. I pick up the cash and go back inside to close up.

Nina's waiting up for me on the couch when I get home, which is odd. Whenever we go out in the evening she's adamant that she gets back by 10 P.M., for her eight hours of sleep to be up at 6. It can be irritating, but I admire her for it. It takes commitment to stick to a routine like that, and that's one of the reasons I asked her to be my AA sponsor.

She leans over the back of the couch. "Hey, how was work?"

"Good," I say slowly, "up until the end."

"What happened?"

I lift up her legs and flump into the couch, letting her feet land in my lap. She's in her pink pajamas, her hair all messy, her eyes wide, and my heart thumps a few times because this is how our spontaneous make-outs always used to begin, the sober ones, anyway, before she ran off with a boy. I clear my throat. "Mabel Pines graced me with her presence again, with her dickhead fiancé in tow."

She scrunches up her face. "Yikes. They're still here?"

"They'll be here all summer, apparently. Maybe I should quit."

"Maybe I should wait 'til tomorrow to spring my bad news on you."

I let out some kind of involuntary sigh and lean back further. "What's the bad news?"

Nina sits up, taking her feet from my lap and crossing her legs. "Kyle and I have been talking about something for a while, and, well, last weekend, we came to a decision."

"You're moving in with him."

She tightens her lips for a long second, then nods. "How'd you guess?"

"Because it's everything I've been afraid of since you came home after that first weekend, and galloped around the apartment like a schoolgirl."

She draws circles in the fabric of the sofa with her finger. "It wasn't an easy decision. And it isn't just because of Kyle. It's... everything. I have to get out of this town, P. I can't go another month washing dishes in that hellhole bar. There'll be so many more opportunities for me out in Portland, and while I figure out what they are, I can work on my writing." Nina's been writing short stories and poetry since she was fifteen, and she publishes them all to this blog with five-thousand followers. They're really, really good, and I must have cried at about a third of them, and although I cry a lot, I'm convinced that one day she'll blow up and I'll call to remind her I was the first follower on that blog, and I'll tell her how proud I am. "Of course," she continues, picking up my hands, "I owe you so much for letting me live here rent-free, and all the nights you've stayed up listening to me rant and ramble and cry. And if you don't want me to go, I'm staying right here."

Really."

"Nina, don't be stupid. It sounds like you have a perfect opportunity to get out of here. If you're sure about this, I'm behind you one-hundred percent."

Her eyebrows arch, like she can't tell whether I'm joking. I don't blame her. I can be *very* sarcastic. "Yeah?"

"Of course."

A squeal escapes her mouth as she flings her arms around me, and I squeeze her back, tighter than I ever have before. She kisses my cheek and whispers into my ear, "I love you."

"I love you too. Just tell me one thing?" I draw back and put my hands on her shoulders. "Tell me he's good to you."

"He is," she says, nodding ardently. "He really is."

I draw a deep breath. "So when is this happening?"

"I'm not sure. A few weeks, maybe? I want to stick around for July 4th, so we can spend that together."

"Like a last hurrah?"

Nina grabs my hands again. "I'm still gonna be around, like, all the time. It's only Portland, I can make it down here for a weekend at least every month. If Kyle argues against that I'll just tell him, hey, dude, you made me abandon my girl every other weekend, now it's your turn. We'll probably even end up spending *more* time with each other."

That makes me smile, even if it does sound like something she would promise to soften the blow.

"Now, um, the other thing: I'm still happy to be your sponsor, I always will be, but I don't know how easy that's going to be if I'm not here."

"Right. Case in point: Last week."

"Mhmm."

I sigh. "Lindsay. It'll have to be."

"I thought so. I still want to be, like, your unofficial sponsor. And I'm going to show up here at random and raid the cabinets, I'm warning you now, and if I find so much as a drop-

"I know, Neens. You're gonna kick my ass."

"I'm gonna kick your ass. And I'm gonna start hitting the gym up in Portland, too, so unless you want some broken bones, I'd seriously think about quitting the booze."

"I don't think AA sponsors are supposed to say things like that."

We're both silent for a while, and then she hugs me again. I hold on, absorbing her warmth, smelling her perfume. It's crazy how I can go from wanting to smooch her to pure, platonic love in a matter of minutes.

"Maybe now I can get some sleep," she says, rising from the couch, leaving me cold. She leans on

the doorframe to her bedroom for a moment, as if there are things left unsaid, but then she says goodnight and shuts the door.

The smile falls from my face. The refrigerator churns out its low hum, which I suppose will soon become the soundtrack to my loneliness. Weird that I can only think about Mabel, when my current best pal just announced that she is leaving town imminently. Mabel disappearing into the woods. Mabel boarding a bus. Mabel driving away. History is repeating itself. Everybody always leaves, and I stay here, and I stay the same.

I yawn and rise to my feet. Halfway to my bedroom, I stop outside Nina's door. I can faintly hear her shuffling about in her socks. A surge of *something* courses through my veins.

I knock. And wait.

Three seconds later, she opens it. I don't why I knocked. I don't know why I'm not saying anything. And I don't know why she isn't saying anything, either. In my fantasy, I leap into her arms and we kiss, intensely, for the last time, stumbling towards her bed and collapsing into it.

In innocent reality, I say, "you wanna have a sleepover in front of the TV?"

She grins and rolls her eyes. "I'll get my pillow."

Chapter End Notes

I don't really like this chapter. OH WELL. FILLER GALORE.

Thanks for the kudos!

Six

In the summer that I was sixteen, Andrew's grandmother died in her sleep.

Imagine, for a moment, waking up next to the person you've spent your life with, starting your morning like any other day, and then an hour later they haven't woken up yet so you go to check on them and they won't respond to your voice, or your touch. You check their pulse, and feel nothing, and then you collapse at the side of the bed clutching their dead hands because that's it, that's fifty years of friendship and love, that's a fifty-year story that you weaved together and it ended while you were sleeping, no time for goodbyes, no memorable last words, and no chance for gradual acclimation to their imminent disappearance from your life. Imagine the heartbreak.

Andrew's grandpa went mad. In the days that followed, he cooked his wife's favorite meal - vegetable lasagna - and set the table for three, every night. He stayed awake in his armchair until the early hours of the morning, because his wife hadn't gone to bed yet and he didn't want her to get lonely watching the television by herself. And one day he pulled up in the driveway, in Andrew's car, having been to pick up a prescription for his wife at the pharmacy.

All the while, Andrew worked with his Aunt Kelly - who lived somewhere along the bible belt - over the phone to arrange a funeral. Kelly drove up to Oregon a few days later, just as she had done ten years before to mourn the joint death of her brother and her sister-in-law - Andrew's parents.

The boy had lived an unforgiving life. So when I heard about his grandma through Mabel, I decided that I couldn't just sit in my bedroom and do nothing. I walked straight to his grandparents' bungalow, recalling the route from the barbecue we were invited to last summer, crossed the gnome-ridden lawn, and knocked on the door. Andrew answered, and while at first he was shocked to see me, and very reserved, a couple of questions later he was talking fast, stumbling over his words, because he had bottled up a lot over a lonely few days, because he had had to remain composed and strong, because his grandpa still needed around-the-clock attention, and at the first chance of a break in that agonizing monotony, he was untethered, releasing all of those pent-up emotions from the sun-soaked front porch. I told him we should go for a walk, and we did, with his grandpa. At the top of a hill, at about five in the afternoon, with the sun blinding our eyes, Andrew turned to me and asked if I would go with him to the funeral, and I said I would.

I won't spin this story to make myself look like a saint - though my heart ached for Andrew, the second reason I reached out to him was a cloud of guilt that had been following me around since early in the spring. I'm not at all proud of what I did.

When the summers ended and I returned to school, that also meant returning to Tiffany and Alina, my childhood friends, who I spent most of my time outside of school avoiding. They didn't mind, I don't think, because our friendship had fizzled out a long time ago. We had all grown up, blossomed into different people, and we kept each other around for convenience; none of us wanted a lunch table to ourselves, broadcasting our incompatibility with other humans.

We still talked, of course, we just seemed to have fundamentally different outlooks on life, and clashing opinions on what were and weren't acceptable things to say. And I'll never know why she did it, perhaps because of her religious background, but we were huddled around her locker, which happened to be a close neighbor of Andrew's, and Tiffany said to us, deliberately loud enough for him to hear, "did you hear that kid's a faggot?"

He turned and focused on each of us for a few seconds, landing on Tiffany, his expression blank.

Tiffany said to him, "what? Are you trying to mentally undress us so you can be normal?"

Alina snickered. I stood there, flicking my attention between his eyes and the floor. After a few seconds, we all dispersed, Andrew still showing no emotion, Tiffany and Alina having switched to a new discussion entirely, as if this moment was already a distant blip in history.

I found Andrew at the end of the day, chased him up the sidewalk on the road leading out of school, and called out his name.

"Hey," I said to him. "I'm really sorry about earlier. I just want you know that we're not all like that, here. I mean we don't all think like that."

He stopped walking, and I saw a crack in the emotionless disguise, something in his eyes like pleading. "Then why didn't you say that in front of them?" he asked, and then he walked away, already aware that I had no answer.

I felt awful after that. I lost sleep over it. I had my morals but I wasn't brave enough to uphold them, and what did that make me? A mindless sheep, accepting the views of anyone around me, no matter how wrong I thought they were, following the path of least resistance, never questioning, never challenging.

The funeral was much like any of the other two funerals I had been to in my life. Began in a church. Moved outside to the graveyard, where I stood in a black dress and watched the coffin sink into the earth. It rained. Andrew held it together the whole time, didn't shed a tear, but when we got back to his house he collapsed into his aunt's arms and sobbed with no restraint. I took my cue to leave. His grandpa was sat out on the porch, absorbing the last hours of daylight, staring vacantly toward the houses opposite. I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed. He looked up at me, gray bags under his eyes, and smiled melancholy. The day had been closure for him, I think.

After that, the plan had been for Kelly to drive Andrew and his grandfather back to Louisiana, where they would live in her farmhouse with her and her husband, their twin daughters having recently flown the nest. But Andrew still had two weeks of school before summer vacation, which - due to some self-imposed obligation - he did not want to miss.

So I told him he could stay with me, and he slept on my floor for two weeks. I offered him the bed, even laid out his sheets, but when I slipped to the bathroom to brush my teeth he took them off and curled up in the corner of the room, on the carpet. My parents were reluctant at first that a boy would be sharing my room, which was a rare show of protectiveness, and when I told them he was gay, a fog of tension suffocated the kitchen. Or maybe that's just how I perceived it.

"What?" I said, my arms folded. "Is that a problem?"

My dad shook his head. "Your mother and I have always been very supportive of the gay community."

Looking back on it, hearing that out loud was a watershed moment for me. Like a final affirmation that it was okay to be... gay. Rhyming unintended.

Andrew's and my friendship was formed on our mutual adoration of a nerdy brunette who didn't stick around for long, and beyond that, we didn't have that much in common. In those two weeks that he stayed, we were most animated in our video calls with Mabel. I think we were both happy to simply provide each other quiet company.

There was one night, a couple of days before he left. I was rocking one of those headaches that

snowballs all day and doesn't let you sleep. I knew he was awake because his breaths were inaudible, no matter how hard you listened, like he thought breathing was an intrusion on the atmosphere of my room.

I shut my eyes and asked him when he knew he was gay.

Nothing for a few seconds. Then, "I don't think there was one definite moment. If you mean when I started telling people, then it was when I was thirteen. But I knew before that, without really knowing. If that makes sense. Like, I had crushes on guys and stuff and I just figured everybody did."

"When was your first crush? On a guy."

"Um... fourth grade? Over at my old school in White City. He was called Sven. He had long black hair always covered up by a bobble hat. And he was always getting told off by the teachers for walking around with his iPod playing out the speakers. They kept confiscating it but he'd come in the next morning with it playing louder and louder. And when I caught his eye he'd grin at me, like it was our own private joke and I was the only one that noticed." Andrew laughed at the memory. "He moved back to Sweden at the end of the year. Never saw him again."

None of this was particularly helpful. "But was it like- how deep did the crushes go? Did you ever get the urge to do anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like... make a move. Or drop a hint that you liked them."

"When I was ten, no, but since then, sure. But I've never acted on those urges. It's too risky. I think if it was like, a friend that I'd grown attracted to, instead of just a random boy in the back of my class, it might be a bit different, because then I'd have a lot more time to interact with them. And figure them out. But that's never happened."

"What would be a sign that they felt the same way?"

"Well... then it's just the same as straight relationships, I guess. You read their body language. See if they're ever trying to get you away from a group, to spend time with you alone. Even then it's always gonna be a bit of a gamble. You've had boyfriends before, right?"

"Yeah. It's never been me making the first move, though."

"You got a guy you like?"

"No."

He was quiet for so long that I thought the conversation was over. "A girl?"

I swallowed, like a tennis ball had fallen from the ceiling and into my throat. "No."

"Alright," he chuckled. "I always like to check."

My Skype calls with Mabel would regularly drift into a limbo-like state where neither of us spoke, or even stayed at our computers. I became acquainted with the ambient sounds of her bedroom - her clearing her throat, or humming tunes, her mom walking in unannounced with clean laundry, a

car driving by outside her open window.

We stayed connected for hours upon hours, peaking at fourteen hours on a Saturday that a band of rain hit both of our states, and there was absolutely nothing else to do. My dad had concerns about the internet bill, and I had to keep telling him that we had unlimited data, which meant we could use the internet as much as we damn well pleased, but he always frowned at me like that was an impossible concept.

A couple of days after Andrew left for Louisiana, I was lost browsing a message board that appeared to be for angry moms, when Mabel said, "I think it was really sweet, you know. What you did for Andrew."

I switched to the Skype window so I could see her. She was brushing her hair, sitting cross-legged on her bed. I didn't know what to say; our praise of one another usually never extended beyond *I love what you've done with your hair today* or *you're really pretty in that dress*. We knew we thought highly of each other and we knew we loved each other.

"It's the least I could do. Especially after I treated him like shit in school."

"*You* didn't do anything wrong. That was all your friends."

"I still let it happen. Sometimes that's just as bad."

"Well, anyway. He told me all about how you held his hand at the funeral, and how you kept bringing food up to your room when he didn't want to move." She lay on her stomach in front of the laptop, her face filling up my screen. "You're an angel, and you don't give yourself enough credit."

Behind my laptop's camera, I clamped my legs together, a warmth rushing to my thighs. I think I shrugged.

"Is this you not being able to take a compliment?" she said, a grin stretching her cheeks.

"Kinda." I wanted to tell her that she was, by definition, the angel. That my life without her would be a bottomless pit of gloom. I said nothing.

"Just say 'thank you, Mabel. You are right as always.'"

"Thank you."

Three days later Mabel stepped off a bus in the center of town in a red sweater, her thick ponytail bouncing around as she charged up the sidewalk to smother me in hugs.

We quickly fell into our old routine, hanging around town, bowling and playing miniature golf until we'd used up all our money, then heading out into the forest to enjoy the gratuity of nature, soaking up the sun on our fishing dock that, to our knowledge, nobody in the world remembered or knew about in the first place. We stole a couple of lawn chairs out of my dad's shed and left them on the dock. We even - in a stroke of genius to rival Einstein - took a stop sign from the side of the road, one that had been knocked over years ago, replaced, and then left there. We took turns carrying it all the way through town, through the woods, racking up a plethora of quizzical looks from the community, including one disgruntled - but ultimately lazy - police officer. Mabel waded out into the water and jammed the post into the lake bed, then strung a hammock she had found in her uncle's storage room across to one of the posts on the dock.

It didn't hold for long. I looked up from my chair later that day just in time to see the signpost

slowly fall over, and Mabel slide down the netting of the hammock and into the water, soaking her clothes and ruining the book she was reading. I don't think I'd ever laughed so hard in my life.

While all of that was fun, we were also getting older, and getting to that age when the insatiable desire to explore outside of our comfort zones overshadowed our interest in exploring the bounds of the forest. Rumor had it that summer in Gravity Falls laid claim to a host of wild, anything-goes parties sprinkled about in abandoned buildings far beyond the limits of town, the kind of thing you overheard a high school kid mention at the bowling alley before his buddy told him to shut the fuck up because *there could be cops listening, man*.

Lucky for us, we had an in - a feral redhead called Wendy Corduroy, who only ever seemed to pause partying when she stumbled into the Mystery Shack for work, popped an aspirin, and fell into the chair behind the counter. She was teaching me how to play poker one night towards the end of July, at the Pines' dining table. I was good at it, apparently; I had a natural poker face - which was a polite way of pointing out that I looked bored all the time.

"I should bring you to my next game with the Sharks," she said. "You could be earning some serious cash."

I pictured her in scuba gear sitting at a poker table on the floor of the ocean, surrounded by sharks that had trouble fitting into the chairs. "Sharks?"

"The Sherville Sharks. They're a biker gang, sorta. The friendliest gang you'd ever meet, but they hang out at this old factory deep in the woods. It's usually liveliest on Saturday nights. I should bring you along some time."

Mabel, who had been appearing at the table periodically just to pluck potato chips from the bowl in the center, heard the last sentence and piped up. "What's on Saturday night?"

"Now you," Wendy said, chuckling, "you are *way* too innocent to be within a mile of the Sherville factory."

"That's no fair," Mabel said. "I can... handle things."

"How old are you again?"

"Sixteen."

"In a month," I said. "You're sixteen in a month."

"*You* are only four months older than me, missy," Mabel said, pulling at my sleeve.

Wendy continued to describe the place, how it was rumored that the factory had shut down after a worker got ground to chunks in one of the machines, how when the parties die down if you listen really carefully you can still hear him scream. Nowadays, she said, people use it for casino games, dancing (or moshing), and live music, but we would have to leave before midnight because that was when things really got out of hand, and we didn't have enough bleach in the house to cleanse the eyes of two youngsters like us if we stuck around to witness it. I watched Mabel's eyes go wide as she slowly chewed on a chip. Wendy had a habit of spinning bullshit horror stories out of thin air.

"Sounds cool," I said. "I'll go."

And because we spent our summers as conjoined twins, Mabel said she would go too.

So that Saturday, once darkness had wrapped up the town for the night, the three of us plus Dipper piled into Wendy's Volkswagen hippie van (*it's not a fucking hippie van*, she kept saying, but I continue to call it that to the present day just to get on her nerves), and set off into uncharted territory, down an unmarked dirt road through the forest at the opposite end of town. I was wearing a black leather jacket I had received for my birthday, because it felt like the most appropriate opportunity I would ever get to wear it in my life. Beside me in the back seat, Mabel wore a black hoodie with *CHEER* printed on the front. She turned to me and smiled, nonchalant.

Thirty minutes later, Wendy stopped the van by the side of the trail, in a spot that could only be described as the center of nowhere. I thought we had broken down, but she and Dipper swung open their doors and jumped out, suggesting that we were, somehow, in the right place. Just before the headlights shut off, I noticed that there were in fact a couple of cars parked further up the road.

It took about a minute to hack our way through the forest before we came to a clearing, and far behind a high chain-link fence, there stood the old factory, three stories tall, two giant industrial chimneys pointing to the stars. White light spilled out of the top row of windows, red light from the bottom row, and darkness in between. I could just about make out the *Sherville Automobile* lettering above the third floor, faintly lit at the bottom and facing the expansive yard that we were just outside of. It was pretty, in its own way. But definitely haunting. It wasn't cold out but I shivered.

The fence had been cut, and Wendy peeled it back to let us all through. Dipper, who had been trailing the girl around on these sorts of excursions for years now, ducked through without a second thought. Mabel and I shared a glance, both of us now questioning the legality of what we were doing. We had both seen the *No Trespassing* signs. But we came here to have fun, not abide by the law, so I kept my mouth shut and crossed the barrier into my new life as a felon.

We cut through thick, overgrown grass, but a path had already been trampled down for us, so I assumed that the indistinct panel of fence we had come through was somehow the official entry point of the hideout. I grabbed Mabel's arm and said into her ear, "memorize this route. If things get too intense we can come back and chill in the van."

Wendy then led us through a wooden door at the side of the building, into some sort of storage closet, and then we were in pitch darkness for a few seconds before she opened a door on the other side, and I thought, *surely* this wasn't necessary, this was just something someone had set up to make the building feel like a top-secret clubhouse. All it was missing was a man-child in a cloak demanding a password.

The inside of the factory reminded me of the sort of building you see in a zombie movie, post-outbreak. The bottom floor was one open space, a bar set up to our right, a dozen round tables scattered about in front of us. At the far end of the room, there was a small lounge area adjacent to a dance floor, white strobe lights attached haphazardly to the ceiling, an epileptic's nightmare. At the far back was a stage kitted out with drums and amplifiers, not in use. A barrel right in the center was being used as a fire pit, and other than that, the room was dimly lit by red LED lamps mounted on the walls. There was a shopping cart beside the bar loaded with junk - on closer inspection, rusted machinery parts that had presumably been swept up and dumped there to clear the floor. I supposed it also doubled up as a convenient weapon dispenser, should a bar fight have broken out.

The place was impossibly packed. Oddly, my first thought walking in was, *where are all these people parked?* I did not believe that we were within walking distance of anywhere.

Anyway, Wendy dragged me to a nearby table occupied by five men in their twenties or thirties, and initiated a different handshake with each of them. Only one of them wore the look I was

expecting of a typical biker - bald head, red beard. His leather jacket had slits in, which were either a fashion choice or the result of a string of knife fights - you can never really tell these days. I glanced over my shoulder to see if the twins were still with us, but Dipper was leading Mabel to a group of younger looking guys that he apparently knew.

I was introduced to the table, told that this was standard Texas hold 'em, and then I neatly laid out the fifty dollars Wendy had told me to bring in front of me.

An hour later, that fifty was two-hundred. I was *flying*, looking down on all of the peasants I had just taken money from, dollar signs careening in my vision, thinking about all the useless shit I was going to buy, maybe I'd get it all changed into pennies and bathe in it, but probably not, because that would be filthy.

And then an hour after that, I had forty bucks. I was slumped over in my chair, drinking my whiskey in double time, feeling an alien urge to declare out loud that lady luck was a cruel mistress, like I was suddenly a fifty-year-old gambling addict at a slot machine in Vegas. Wendy was doing okay; she was up by a hundred, and when I decided to quit she patted my shoulder and whispered that I'd get 'em next time, but I didn't think I would come back. I wasn't emotionally stable enough to ride that rollercoaster.

Mabel was dancing by herself to an alt-rock song I recognized from the radio but couldn't name, thrusting her shoulders and thrashing her arms, her hair whipping about in a brunette blaze. It was a miracle she wasn't hitting anybody. She was either blurry, or I was drunk on two glasses of whiskey. Nevertheless, she triggered that irritating flutter in my stomach that always came at the worst times and made my muscles seize up, like when she asked me to rub sunscreen into her back a few days before.

She spotted me teetering on the edge of the dance floor and waggled her eyebrows, motioned me over with her finger. I tended to be self-conscious dancing around other people, but not when Mabel was with me. She was... an unconventional dancer, but a social chameleon, effortlessly blending into any environment, and when she took my hands and danced with me I was too spellbound to care that we looked like a duo of stroke victims.

Her palms were sweaty, but my body still thrummed in appreciation at the touch. The space was densely packed, so I tried to stick close to her, and over the speakers we were directly under, she yelled, "how'd your poker game go? Are we rich?"

"I lost ten dollars."

"Well that's not so bad. I was expecting you to lose at least a hundred."

"Hey, screw you. I don't see you out there trying to put bread on the table."

"Nope, but I have been putting something *else* on the table," she said, dancing with her eyebrows again.

"What?"

"I've been talking to a pair of lovely boys," she purred, very pleased with herself.

"Oh, god."

"Zane and Kieran, they were called."

"And let me guess, you couldn't decide which one to ask out so you asked them both."

Mabel had a rather aggressive approach to dating. One time, she was shopping at the mall with her brother, a fresh box of french fries in her hand, when she spotted a cute boy with glasses. Her pupils dilated, primal instincts kicked in, and she zipped through a herd of bodies just to barge into him and purposely spill her food all over the floor. He was profusely apologetic, offered to buy her another box, but she said she'd forget all about it if he gave her his number. That night, the boy texted her that he was flattered, but also very, very gay. The boy's name was Andrew. A year later, he and I would become close friends, and he would sleep on the floor of my bedroom for two weeks.

"No," Mabel said. "Zane asked *me* out. And then I pointed out to Kieran that I have a gorgeous, single, blonde best friend, so... we have a double date."

I don't know if you've ever received troubling news on a dance floor, but for me, it was quite a strange moment. I didn't stop moving, I just swayed around at half-speed, like I was at a preteen disco and I wasn't that into it. "What?" I whined. "Why'd you have to get me involved?"

"What?" She couldn't hear me, because we had somehow moved even closer to the speakers pumping bass into our ears.

I dropped one of her hands and dragged her outside, through the wide open front door of the factory that wasn't accessed via a closet. There were a couple of smokers on the corner of the building, but other than that, it was us and the crickets. "Why would you assume I wanted to spend an evening with a guy that *you* just met?"

She shrugged and folded her arms. "It doesn't have to be a whole evening."

"That's obviously not the point."

"I thought it'd be fun. You know, being each other's wingman. Wing-woman."

"Yeah, you do that a lot. Something sounds fun to you, so you drag other people into it because you assume it'll be fun for them as well."

She looked down and kicked a pebble. "Alright, I'll just go with Zane, then."

I considered this for a moment. I didn't know anything about Zane. Mabel had had some terrible taste in guys before. And that wasn't even the jealousy talking - some of them were objectively terrible. She dated a boy called Trey who used to sneeze into his sleeve and then lick it. "Well... no, if you still want to go, then I'll go too."

"You just said you didn't want to!"

"I don't, but I don't want you to go alone, either."

She grumbled and took two steps away from me. "Don't start with this again."

"Don't start with *what*?"

"Don't start treating me like I'm your little sister and you need to chaperone me around everywhere. I'm fifteen, not five, I can go out and meet a boy by myself. You're worse than Dipper."

"Look around you, Mabel. This is a sleazy, smokey *bar* full of bikers and thugs and alcoholics. There was somebody doing coke, right over there, in the corner. And you're gonna blindly trust somebody you met within two hours to take you out for the night?"

"There are a handful of people like that here, at worst. If you actually take a moment to talk to somebody you might find that they're really nice, like Zane and Kieran."

"Are they nice, or deceptively nice because they want to get in your pants?"

She shook her head and glowered. "I get *so* tired of your negativity sometimes. Lighten up," and then she stormed back into the factory, and I didn't particularly feel like following her, so I trudged back to the hole in the fence and sat up against it, picking grass and slamming it into the dirt, until Wendy emerged half an hour later, with the keys to the van and the twins in tow.

We never stayed angry at each other for long. Although we were silent in the back of Wendy's van, when she dropped Mabel off I got out and gave her a hug, and then we texted apologies back and forth for an hour until I fell asleep.

In the end, I agreed to go along with the double date. The disaster I was expecting after a night at an abandoned factory was that one of us would be murdered, not that I would wind up in a romcom-esque double-date-but-I'm-attracted-to-my-friend type of situation. It would be painful to sit through, I knew, but behind my hopefully-temporary crush, I still loved Mabel unconditionally and valued her happiness over a lot of things. Plus, I was holding out hope that Kieran would be a realization of my dreams and put me back on the straight path.

And he was, seriously, the hottest son of a bitch that I had ever sat opposite in a restaurant. He was Chinese-American, with slick black hair parted to one side. He wore a burgundy button-up shirt that struggled to contain his biceps. When he smiled, he oozed confidence, but not arrogance; it was the kind of confidence that made you think, *damn, that guy's got his life in order*.

But, if you're this far into the story, it won't come as any surprise that Kieran and I never got married and pumped out a handful of immaculate children for the world to enjoy. I felt nothing for him. In fact, while we sat through *Jurassic World* at the theater, I slouched back in my seat and gave up, gave into the whole thing. I was gay. The actress on screen, I didn't know her name, was far more enticing to me than Chris Pratt, and Chris Pratt one-upped Kieran as the epitome of manliness, and if I wasn't into either of them, then no penis on the planet was ever going to win me over.

I don't remember if we planned it out explicitly, but the date was supposed to end once we were out the doors of the theater. I figured that Zane and Kieran would each head out in their cars and Mabel and I would make the five minute walk back to my house. And in fact, when Zane proclaimed that the night was young and invited us back to his place in Eagle Point because his folks were out of town, I thought for sure that Mabel would have had the sense to say no. But she must have really, *really* liked the guy, because she held his hand and hunched her shoulders at me as if to say, *why not?*

I could think of a dozen reasons why not, and I knew I should have said something, but what she told me outside the factory about my helicopter parenting had really stuck with me, so I let her go. I told them I was tired, I would head home, but they should go on ahead, and Kieran got into his own car and left, sharing my quiet sentiment that this was the amicable end to our brief storyline. Then I had to watch my best friend get into a stranger's car, dressed up all pretty, and disappear around the corner, away from my protection. Walking home in the dark, I tried to tell myself that I didn't own her, that she could handle herself, and I was also kind of angry how quickly she jumped to the senseless decision to travel way out of town with an older guy that she barely knew, to his empty house, after 9 P.M., so by the time I got home, my thoughts were more along the lines of *I'll let her make her own mistakes*.

I still couldn't sleep, of course. Not without knowing she was still breathing. I lay in my bed,

watching the ceiling hang in place like it usually did. Sometimes I'd get lost there, thinking about Mabel, and sometimes I would picture her in her own bed, gazing up, thinking the same things about me, like if I imagined it hard enough it would actually be happening. Tonight was no different.

And then tonight was very different, because at 11 P.M. I received a text that suggested she was lying in her bed thinking about me:

didn't go with zane in the end. he's sweet but his house is very far away so i just asked him to drop me back at the shack. i'm sorry i dragged you out tonight, i'll think next time before i agree to something like that :P and thank you for coming with me even tho you didn't want to. i know you only worry because you care about me. Anyway, i'm beat, and crashing from the one and a half sundaes i shouldn't have eaten. goodnight, love you xx

In the following days, I would reread that message fourteen times.

At the end of my first day as a high school junior, there was a letter addressed to me on the dining room table. An actual, handwritten letter, from Oak Grove, Louisiana. I didn't even realize the postal system still existed.

It read:

Hey Pacifica,

First things first, I'm sorry I haven't been Skyping with you and Mabel over summer. Things have been crazy busy down here. I spend a lot of my time now thinking up new ways to not die of heat exhaustion. I've got two desk fans set up and an open window, but I apologize in advance if this letter produces a sweaty mist when you open it.

I don't think I ever properly thanked you for everything you did for me, after my grandma passed away. I think back to those few weeks every once in a while, and I find that it's all hazy. I can't quite remember what I did or the things that I said. It's weird. I guess I was too young to feel that the first time around, with my Mom and Dad. What I do remember is that you listened to me on countless occasions, and told me things I needed to hear, and kept me sane. A lot of other stuff. I owe you so much and I have so little to give. Hopefully this letter is a start.

My grandpa's doing just fine. You were right about the funeral, he hasn't denied grandma's death since then. The view from our porch here is much more scenic than what we had back in Gravity Falls, which is great. He likes to help Kelly milk the cows, too. Oh! The other day he asked me what happened to the nice blonde girl that used to stop by, so you must have made a good impression. He said you'd have to come over and try his lasagna some time - apparently you expressed great interest in it before? Not sure if he made that up.

Things for me are going pretty great. It feels weird to have just written that. But it's true! I'm not sure if you know, but down here in the south, folks aren't famous for their tolerance of homosexuals. And I have no idea how I'm going to handle school, when that starts. Maybe I'll lie low for a while, maybe I'll strut in on my first day in a rainbow scarf and high heels. Haven't decided yet. I'm attending church now, because Kelly's really into it, and the pastor is gay-friendly, which has given me a lot of hope. He preaches equality a lot in his sermons. I don't want to get ahead of myself too much, but I've also met a boy through church, and I'm 87% sure he's gay and 43% sure he's into me. I'll keep you posted, if you want. His name is Steven and he has four sisters. Four!

I have a lot more to say, but I'll get back online soon instead of wasting paper and your time. This summer, on a friggin' farm, has been exactly what I needed. I've had so much time to think, and recover. I hope that you and Mabel have had a fantastic summer up in Oregon, and I promise I will make my way up there soon to visit, because it's already been too long. I hope that you are well and I would love to hear from you.

Andrew

P.S. I don't have anything to put here. I started writing P.S., then realized I had nothing to say, but I've gone this whole letter without crossing anything out, so I wasn't gonna start here. Alright. Bye.

P.P.S. Just kidding. Bye.

I laughed, and two tears fell from my eyes, on to the page. I dabbed at them with the hem of my shirt. I had to tell him that the letter was the perfect cure for a lonely day, so I pulled out my phone, and *nearly* dialed his number.

Instead, I tore some lined paper out of my notebook, sat down at my desk, and began to write.

Seven

After the weekend, I have a couple of days off work, which is a rare luxury. Nina has quit her job at the bar in town - the same bar I used to play piano at, and also where I met Nina when I turned to drinking - so we spend the whole two days together, squeezing in as much friendship as possible before she leaves town for good. We take turns making breakfast, and eat together at the kitchen bar, we go to the mall and the movie theater, we go out for dinner; all the things we used to do, before we became complacent and considered watching TV from the same couch sufficient bonding. She talks a lot about Portland and Kyle and I'm excited for her, truly, but sometimes it's hard to hide how much I'm going to miss her.

When I get to the diner on Wednesday morning, there's a new girl behind the counter, wearing the blue Greasy's uniform. She's facing the kitchen, so all I see is a wavy brown ponytail and a pink scrunchy, a petite and slender frame. When it pops into my head that she's cute, I honestly consider bolting back out the door, because that's the same girl I've been internally debating whether to hug or punch the next time I see her, and I haven't come to a decision yet.

Mabel Pines, Greasy's waitress. It just doesn't sound like it's going to work. I rush into the back office with my head down, where Lindsay is sat in front of a spreadsheet, her reading glasses pressed right up to the monitor.

"Morning hon," she says. "Nice break?"

"Yeah," I sigh. "You didn't tell me we had somebody starting today."

She frowns, pulling her glasses further down her nose. "That's Mabel, the girl you recommended. She started yesterday. She didn't tell you?"

I guess I gave Lindsay the impression that we're friends. Are we friends? I don't think so. Why did I tell her about the job again? "We're not on the best of terms right now."

"Well, dear, you should have said. I'm not sure I can do anything now - I can't ask her to leave."

"No, of course not. I wouldn't ask you to do that. It's fine. We'll work something out," I say, forcing a smile and hanging up my hoodie on the coat hooks.

"While I have you here, I'm trying to click on these little boxes to change the figures but it won't let me."

I lean in to look at the monitor. "That's a screenshot of a spreadsheet that you've opened as a PowerPoint presentation." She doesn't know what half of those words mean, so I take the mouse and sort it out for her, like I always do.

You know those perfume commercials where some gorgeous woman struts around a busy city street, halting traffic and parting crowds like Moses, with a look of utmost arrogance because she's the only one among these heathens who has figured out that the secret to success is to smell like flowers? I walk out of the office kind of like that, right up to Mabel, who is now brewing coffee.

I tell her, "look, we don't have to get along, we don't even have to talk to each other. Just stay out of my way, and we'll be fine. And don't even think about inviting your boyfriend back here, or I'll tell Lindsay about how he tried to rob the place on Saturday night." I don't wait around for a response.

The rest of the day plays out exactly as expected. The only thing I say to her is, "I've got this one,"

when a group walks in and both of us are unoccupied. Beth and I divvy up the tables fifty-fifty when we're on the same shift, but Mabel hasn't picked up on that yet, and I'll take the extra tips away from her until she does.

I get a two hour break in the afternoon, and Wendy pulls up in her van with Nina riding shotgun. They honk the horn from the parking lot an obnoxious number of times, cackling as I hurry out the door with my head down. We're headed to a café out of town, because eating diner food as half of my meals makes my face flare up with spots if I keep it up for too long. But just as I'm climbing in the back seat, Wendy spots Mabel walking around inside and practically falls out of the van in excitement. Nina follows along behind her, saying she wants to introduce herself, despite everything I've told her about Mabel.

And I just sit back in the van, watching them between the two headrests. Mabel lights up when she sees Wendy, and accepts a rather full-on hug. She shakes Nina's hand. I don't like it. I'm watching two universes collide and I don't like it. They're interrogating Mabel for a good five minutes, and she keeps glancing over her shoulder at Lindsay or a table she's supposed to be serving, clearly wary of being a time thief.

When my disloyal friends finally decide to return to the van, Wendy asks me, "has it been awkward?"

"A little."

"I can't see how," Nina says. "She seems lovely."

I scowl at the back of Nina's head. "That's all part of her act. You don't know her."

The afternoon is even quieter than the morning. It starts to rain outside. It's the kind of afternoon that Lindsay usually digs Connect 4 out of the back office and sets it up for us on the counter, periodically glancing out the windows and providing running commentary on the weather ("*it's really coming down out there*", "*cats and dogs*", et cetera). But today she's distracted, making a lot of discreet calls from the phone on her desk. My theory is she's seeing a new man (or getting laid, as Beth so delicately puts it). I keep glancing back into the office and Lindsay's giggling into the receiver, reviving her teenage girlhood, which makes me smile.

Mabel spends the downtime sitting in the booth in the far corner, reaping the benefits of unlimited soda. Every time my eyes drift over her she isn't absorbed in her phone, tapping into the wide world outside the diner, which is my default mode. She's gazing out the window, into the forest, or at the fragments of town visible from here. She was always like that, I guess. Like all that's important is whatever's in her immediate vicinity.

Time crawls, and at 7 P.M. I notice her throw on a jacket and her backpack. I'm polishing glasses, trying to expel her out the door telepathically, but of course she appears opposite me and leans across the counter.

"Can we talk?" she says.

A derisive laugh falls out of my mouth. "Where would we start?"

"I could start by apologizing. For everything. Though I'm not sure that would mean much to you now."

"You're right. And I'm still on shift, anyway."

"Then can I come back later?"

"Seems to me that we could spend an hour dredging up the past and then avoid each other all summer, or we could just avoid each other all summer."

"Is that what you want? *You're* the one who told me about this job opening."

"Yeah, well... alcohol can cloud your judgement. Kinda like how you stumbled in here the other night with the idea that our food is free."

Her lips draw a straight line. "For the record, I told Lindsay about all of that before I even sat down for my interview. And I've told Jason to stay away from here if he can't behave himself. We're both sorry."

"I don't need his apology. The guy's an ape."

I'm not watching, but I hear her huff and walk away. And then she's there again. "I'm not going to quit. And I'm not going to give up trying to talk to you, either." She opens her mouth, like there's more to say, then shuts it and scurries outside.

In my Saturday AA meeting, I share with the group for the first time ever. I wasn't planning on it, but I've been going through a spell of pre-emptive loneliness, what with Nina's impending departure. I've been considering asking Wendy to move in with me, but I don't think it's a good idea. Her life seems like one eternal party at times, and I doubt I could convince her to tone that down in the apartment for my sake.

I tell the group I'm two weeks sober, that I'm worried that my sponsor leaving town will distress me to the point of relapse. People nod and hum agreement and spout words of encouragement. It's always hard to tell who is being fake-nice, though. One of the rules of AA is *don't be an asshole*, so how am I supposed to know which of them genuinely care for what I have to say? And does it even matter? Probably not. Nina says I have trust issues. I think she's right, but can I really trust her opinion?

I have to catch the bus back to Gravity Falls, which I have only ever seen one other person ride on. I'm skeptical as to why it still bothers showing up every hour. If you haven't already realized, I never learned how to drive. It's one of those things I've put off doing for so many years that it no longer feels necessary for my survival. All my school friends were older than me by a number of months, so they were all driving before I turned fifteen, and I could hitch rides around with them, wherever they were going. My mom points out every time I see her that it's a useful skill to have, and she has offered to teach me on several occasions, but spending extended lengths of time in an enclosed space with my mother is *bound* to cause fatalities. I wouldn't be able to resist the urge to swerve into oncoming traffic. Or park on a railway.

The weather has finally picked up, but I have to enjoy it through the windows of the diner in the afternoon. My shift overlaps with Beth's, but she leaves at 4 P.M. and Mabel takes over. They chat by the door for fifteen minutes like they're already best friends, which makes sense. I've overheard customers refer to Beth and I as "the bubbly one" and "the moody one."

About an hour into her shift, Mabel trips while carrying a tray loaded with drinks, and collapses to the ground with a symphony of smashed glass. I watch the whole spectacle from behind the counter, amused at first, and then worried because she doesn't spring back up from the floor right away. Lindsay hurries over from the table she was serving at an unprecedented speed for high heels, and crouches to make sure she's okay, before apologizing to the family the drinks were for, who look down at Mabel with concern in their eyes and milkshake on their shoes. Once I see her

on her feet again with Lindsay's help, I grab the broom out of the kitchen and move in to sweep up the broken glass. Mabel hobbles towards the back office, her shirt wet around her midriff, and I almost freak out before I realize it's Coke, not blood. Her eyes flick up to mine for a second, both of us devoid of expression.

It's not until that evening, when the floor's clean and showing no trace of the drama, and we're clear of customers, that I start to feel sorry for her. She's back in that booth in the corner, rubbing at the shoulder she fell on, reading a crumpled piece of notepaper flattened out on the table. Her fall seems to have sapped the energy out of her. Beyond the physical pain, it can be embarrassing, the silence following the crash, the collective stares of the restaurant, everybody internally questioning if they should jump in and help. God knows I've felt all of it before.

I walk over, sit opposite her in the booth, and hold her gaze for a second. "Is your shoulder okay?"

She nods, and pulls down the short sleeve, folds her hands over the paper in front of her.

"What brought you back here?" I ask her, because it's been weighing on my mind. I don't mean for it to sound spiteful; my voice naturally takes on that tone sometimes.

"It's my job," she says.

"No, not the diner. I mean, why did you come back to Gravity Falls?"

"Oh. Well, I don't know if you heard, but my Uncle Ford passed away back in November."

"That sucks. No, I hadn't heard."

"We never had a funeral because he requested us not to in his will, which I thought was crazy. But he also left three envelopes - one for Stan, one for me, one for Dipper. They're supposed to lead us to fulfill his last wishes. That's what I have here," she says, sliding the note across the table.

In neat handwriting, it reads:

My contents will feed mouths

And sometimes flows from them,

Like the talk of monsters

And relics forgotten,

Trust no one, lies linger

On the lips that you meet,

But nothing holds secrets

Like the earth at my feet.

"A riddle," I say, pointlessly.

"Mhmm. The envelope said it was only to be opened once I was in Gravity Falls, and that's all that was inside. Dipper already came up here in his winter break to open his, but he wouldn't tell me anything about it. When I sent him this riddle, he said I have to work it out myself, that Ford would have wanted it that way. But I'm getting worried I'm going to be up here all summer without ever figuring it out. Stan's gone off on his boat, as part of his. He couldn't tell me where."

I look up and frown. "So your uncle wanted all of you to run around scratching your heads to carry out his last wishes? That's a dick move."

She looks at me blankly.

"Sorry."

"It's fine. Ford was just always like this, he lived his life through riddles and codes and puzzles. It's fitting, really. Dipper loves it, Stan is... tolerating it. I don't think I'm smart enough for it, though," she chuckles.

"Is he talking about some kind of animal? *My contents will feed mouths*. Like a pig or a cow?"

"Maybe. But then the second line doesn't make sense."

"*And sometimes flows from them*," I murmur. I only met Mabel's uncle a handful of times. I know he used to spend a lot of time in the basement of the Mystery Shack, and people rarely knew what he was up to. If Mabel knew the man and she can't figure this out, I don't think I stand much of a chance. I pass the paper back to her and turn my attention to the window.

"Pacifica," she says, her voice low. "If I could take back everything I did..."

"Don't, please. Please don't start talking about that."

"But I'm going to be here for three months, I don't see how we can work together and ignore it the whole time."

"Why not?" I say, standing up. The ceasefire is over. "It happened four years ago, we should both be over it."

I go back to the counter and say over my shoulder, "talking about it isn't going to change anything."

So we fall silent again. Customers wander in and out, and I'm so busy keeping up the rhythm of avoiding Mabel that I don't stop to consider why Lindsay has assigned me a buddy for the evening shift until the very end of the night. It's possible that she's lost trust in me since my hiccup two weeks ago, but what did she think I was going to do tonight? Throw a rave in her diner? I don't see why she would so quickly put all of her faith in Mabel to keep me in check.

As the night winds down, the music playing over the speakers changes every few seconds, because Mabel has found the digital jukebox and can't get over how high-tech it is. I've heard snippets of Taylor Swift, Daft Punk, Three Dog Night, Rihanna, Elvis Presley, and Frank Sinatra all in the course of thirty seconds. How diverse.

I bite down on my tongue for as long as I can bear. "Can you pick a fucking song and leave it alone?" I call out.

You Make My Dreams by Hall & Oates comes on, and Mabel appears from behind the soft serve machine, bouncing her body around mechanically.

"Oh, for god's sake."

She extends both of her arms and points at me on the *you ooh, ooh ooh* part, and my lips betray me and form a smirk. She edges closer to the counter and holds out her hand over the cash register. I can see the creases in her palms.

"Absolutely not."

"Come on," she sings. "For old times' sake."

"No. I'm not just going to pretend that everything's okay, Mabel."

She slows to a standstill, and lets her arms hang limply at her sides. Our eyes land in a cold standoff, the upbeat tune suddenly seeming like a poor choice for the moment. I'd love to walk in her shoes for a day, see what the world looks like through her rose-tinted pupils.

Julio bursts through the kitchen door, as he sometimes does for no obvious reason. He glances between us, clearly aware that he has walked in on something uncomfortable, but then with utmost indifference, he says goodnight, saunters to the door, slings his apron towards the coat rack, misses, and then walks outside anyway.

We hurry between tables, cleaning up for the night. Mabel is just about to leave as I'm emptying the mop bucket into the kitchen sink, and the murky water swirling into the drain jogs my mind. *My contents feeds mouths and also flows from them.*

"Hey, Mabel?" I call out, pushing through the kitchen door.

She turns around by the door, her jacket half-zipped, mouth hanging open.

"What about water?"

"Huh?"

"The riddle," I say, advancing across the room and gesticulating at her pocket. "Water feeds mouths."

She straightens out the paper and I read it again over her shoulder. "But does it flow from mouths?"

"The mouth of a river," I say, and watch her eyes light up.

"So it could be, like... a water bottle?"

"I don't know. The middle part doesn't make a lot of sense. And whatever it is, it has to have feet," I say, pointing at the last line.

There's a minute of quiet, save for our breathing. Then Mabel practically shouts, "the water tower!" She grips onto my arm and quickly swipes her hand back, like it burned. "The water tower has legs. And I told Grunkle Ford all about how I climbed it once with Stan, to help him get over his fear of heights, but then I ended up hating heights more than he did, and... it *has* to be the water tower, Ford is trying to... make me relive my memories, or something."

We leave the diner at the same time, and walk side by side along the short unlit trail back to town, using my phone's flashlight. Neither of us need to say anything; we both know that I'm going back to the Mystery Shack with Mabel, to fetch whatever it is we need to dig up a dead man's wealth in the middle of the night. For old times' sake.

The Shack comes into view from the winding dirt road, and my heart skips a beat. Every time I walk by it I can see the ghost of my younger self in the front yard, sprawled out on the couch on the porch, lighting fireworks, climbing into Wendy's van. And I can feel traces of that betrayal from when Mabel left for the last time.

She unlocks the front door and lets us in. I hadn't planned on crying today, so when tears spring to my eyes I breathe deeply and blink until they back off. Everything is just how I remember it, with that warm yellow glow from the lamps flooding the front room. The furniture is all in the same place, the armchair, the fish tank, the TV, the table at the back where I ate breakfast and played poker and fell further and further in love. The peeling wallpaper. Everything awful and magical about it, all still here. After all these years.

Mabel starts to say something, but her fiancé wanders into view, spoiling it. He's eating cereal standing up. I bet the milk splashes on his beard and dries up. "Hey babe," he says, and when his eyes flitter to me he almost chokes. "Oh shit. Hey, um, I'm really sorry about the other night, um..."

"Pacifica."

"Pacifica. I'm really sorry about that, I'd been drinking since, like, four, and I get silly when I'm drunk. And those other guys were egging me on, and... you know."

I shake my head. "That's not how I remember it."

There's nothing, now, except the low buzz of a light bulb. Fiancé chews slowly on his cereal, because, yes, he gave that whole spiel through a mouthful of oats.

Mabel takes my arm again and tugs me toward the stairs. "We're heading back out in a minute," she calls out. "Got some things to take care of."

I follow her up the stairs, Jason's shadow draping over us. "This late?" he says.

"Yep."

"What are you doing?"

"The thing that I came here to do," she says, venom in her voice like I've never heard. Then to me, she mutters, "the thing he didn't want any freaking part in."

We wind up in the storage room, which is the only part of the building that seems different. It's more cluttered. I suppose that makes sense - Stan Pines is a notorious hoarder. Mabel dives right in, ducking under a shelf and rummaging behind boxes.

"Why is he here?" I ask, keeping my voice low. "I mean, if he wasn't helping with the riddle, what does he do all day?"

"That's a great question. When we first got here, we took a lot of nature hikes. Did some of the touristy stuff. Did you know they replaced Li'l Gideon with a lookalike? He *sucks*, the poor kid. I'm not even convinced he's telepathic," she says, popping up behind a large chest like a gopher.

I frown. "Li'l Gideon wasn't telepathic either."

"Wasn't he?"

"Do I even need to answer that?"

"Well anyway, now Jason has discovered that drinking all day with those buddies of his he found down at the boating lake is a dandy way to spend his summer. I mean, I like a drink as much as the next person, but him? It's like he's become dependent on it. I wouldn't be surprised if that was tequila on his cereal."

I keep my mouth shut after that. Judge not lest ye be judged.

"Aha," Mabel shouts. She lifts up two shovels and grins like a maniac.

At just after midnight, Mabel sets a flashlight on the ground, illuminating the patch of dirt directly below the town's water tower. We start by digging below each leg, but find nothing, and just as I'm realizing that none of my drunk late-night escapades were ever this absurd and I consider walking home, I jam my shovel into the center of the patch and hit something metallic. Mabel hears it and whips her head around. I step back and let her take over, and after a minute of dodging the dirt flying at my legs, Mabel pulls a small toolbox out of the ground and wipes it down with her bare hands.

She looks up at me. "I don't know if I'm ready for what's in here."

I can imagine. Opening that box is like letting go, saying goodbye, for good. "I'd offer to open it for you, but I think it's got to be you."

Mabel crouches down next to the flashlight, takes a breath, and opens the box, wincing as if it's about to explode. She pulls out a single piece of paper and pores over it, her eyebrows knitting together. When she doesn't speak, I squat next to her and read it myself.

It's a grid of sixteen squares, four rows by four columns, some with squiggly black lines, some containing rectangles, and some with nothing at all. The square in the top left contains a bold 'X'; Mabel points to it and murmurs that it's some kind of map. Each square has a pair of numbers in the corner, presumably coordinates. But the lines don't connect at all, like the squares are in the wrong order.

She groans. "My head hurts."

"It's late. I could help you with it another time," I say, without really thinking. "I mean, if you want."

"That'd be great," she smiles, and I notice that our faces are danger-close, and our eyes are locked, and I can feel her breath on my face.

And I stand up and shrug it off, because it was under those exact circumstances that the ugly demise of our friendship began.

Eight

In the winter that I was sixteen, my parents got a divorce.

I've heard that most kids see that coming - a tangible shift in the atmosphere of the house, like an argument waking you up in the morning, or an extended silence at the dinner table. Your mom asking you to relay messages to your dad, and vice versa. But from a young age, I had always known that my parents weren't in love, and in fact, they had never acted like they had *ever* been in love. I always joked with Mabel that they were products of aliens, beamed down to Earth to study human behavior, and that was why they were so shit at parenting.

I suppose Mom stuck with Dad for so long because of his wealth, and I just expected that to last until they died. But when his wealth took a huge dent, so did her interest in him.

You can imagine that I didn't feel bad for either of them, really, and I wasn't upset that they were splitting up - I was upset that I couldn't get upset. I couldn't get upset about my family falling apart, because it never felt like a family to begin with.

Mabel couldn't tell the difference. She fussed over me for a week on our video calls, and I hate to admit that I played up my misery to keep her attention, even shedding a few crocodile tears here and there. One night, she went offline and texted me an hour later asking how I'd feel about spending the second week of my winter break with her, and her family, at her house, in *California*. Her parents had suggested it.

I nearly squealed with excitement. My mom and dad would gladly throw a hundred dollars in my direction to get rid of me for a week, the burden that I was, and while Christmas was gloomy, I grinned my way through it because in a matter of days I would be cruising down I-5 (on a bus) to an adventure outside of the suffocating confines of my town.

The day after Christmas, I packed a suitcase to the brim with things I obviously wouldn't need, like my winter coat, just because carrying a full suitcase made me feel more important. I didn't get a lot of sleep that night. Couldn't stop thinking about the beach, and Mabel in a bikini. Then the next morning, my dad drove me to the bus stop, where I boarded the Greyhound to San Francisco, and I sat patiently in my seat for five hours watching the landscape transition behind the window.

The speck of San Francisco that I saw from the bus station was overwhelming, and while I would have loved to come back and explore with Mabel, my first time alone in unfamiliar territory was making me a little anxious, so I jumped in the first taxi I could find and gave the driver Mabel's address. Half an hour later, the driver pulled up outside a bungalow way up in the hills, totally obscured by shrubbery except for the garage and the roof. I laughed in disbelief when I saw the skyscrapers of San Francisco through the windshield, standing tall between the ocean and the hills - the Pines had a view of the whole city from up here.

I hopped out and the driver passed me my suitcase. I tipped him twenty dollars of my parents' money.

Then I heard her voice, for once not filtered by the microphone on her laptop, then I saw her running barefoot down the driveway, in the flesh, chanting, "oh my god!"

I beamed at her. "Hey!"

"You're here," she squeaked, throwing her arms around me. "It's you and you're here and you're

you!"

"I'm here," I laughed.

"Look at you. Have you gotten taller?"

"Nope. Have you gotten cuter?"

She grinned and curtsied. God, I loved her. She was a dork and I loved her. "I get cuter every day. It's my superpower. Come on, for god's sake, come inside. I have to show you *everything*."

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, so they say. In my case, absence enlarged my heart to inhuman proportions and forced me to forget everything else about life. Mabel showed me around her home, pointing out inconsequential things like lamps and cat trees, excitement trumping reason, and I had a hard time taking my eyes off her flushed cheeks. That night, we hung out in Dipper's room, eating pizza out of the box. Our talk naturally drifted to memories of Gravity Falls, because that was the one thing we all had in common, the one thing that would follow us everywhere, forever. I watched Mabel laugh at her own stories in between bites of pepperoni, I watched her tuck her hair behind her ear, I watched her wink at me. Every ounce of attention from her felt like a gift.

Contrary to my initial belief, California isn't immune to clouds - it was overcast for the rest of the week. I never did get that beach day and an opportunity to rub sun screen into her back, and slide my hand under the elastic of her bikini bottom and pretend it slipped. No, I wouldn't have done that. I don't think.

The weather didn't matter. What was important, was the freedom, and being together. Mabel had a beautiful cherry red Jeep that - with some effort - we could remove the top from, and drive around with the wind in our hair and an unhealthy level of petrol fumes invading our lungs. We took a day to drive into San Francisco and shop for clothes to wear at the New Years' Eve party the twins had been invited to, and stopped for lunch in a cafe nestled tightly in a row of shops and apartments, the street angled vertically at 45 degrees. The whole time we were in line, I kept glancing over at two women holding hands across their table. They caught me looking and broke apart; probably thought I was judging. Inside, I was elated. There, right before my eyes, was hope.

We turned another day into a mini golf tournament, driving between a total of five courses surrounding her town. She won three games, I won two, but I scored a point on the bonus hole and got a free ice cream, which I gave to her, because I was such a romantic. In the evening, we drove around her neighborhood, going nowhere in particular, with *Hollywood Nights* playing on the radio. It was simple, but liberating. I forgot I had a home back in Oregon, and a family, and people I loosely considered friends.

It was the day after that - New Years' Eve Eve - that things got weird. Her mom cooked dinner - beef casserole - and we all sat around their dining table. It was traditional for the family to play a board game after dinner, one night a week, so I played *Clue* for the first time. We went back to her room and wound down by watching a movie in bed, her laptop in between our legs. I had been sleeping in her queen bed every night - with her entire wardrobe scattered about the floor in colorful piles, there wasn't much of an alternative. Not that I would have taken an alternative, anyway.

Long after the movie had finished, as Mabel danced around getting ready for bed, I stayed glued to her sheets, hugging my knees to my chest, lost in thought. I was morose; half of my trip was over. I had one full day left. Then New Years' Day would roll around, and I'd be shipped back up to the monotony of my daily life.

Only when Mabel slipped into the sheets in her pajamas did she notice I was lifeless. "You okay?"

I nodded, my chin bumping against my knees.

"What's wrong?"

"Being around your family... I guess it's been a glaring reminder how shitty my parents are. I mean, I know I've always been spoiled, and I shouldn't complain, but, god, I envy how close you are with your mom and dad. And Dipper."

"I'm just really lucky," she said.

"Yeah. So am I, in different ways. I don't know, maybe I'm being stupid."

"You're not," she said, taking one of my hands and squeezing it. "It's okay to want more from your parents. I would too."

I smiled. "Thanks."

"And you know, you're always welcome here. Mom and Dad *love* you, you're basically one of the family already. And I like keeping my favorite person in arms' reach."

"I'm your favorite person?"

She frowned, like that should have been obvious. "Well yeah. I feel like you should know that by now. You remember I literally used to chase you around Gravity Falls trying to get your attention?"

I supposed that was true. These days, I couldn't imagine us not being friends right away. But I used to be a different person, one who would turn her away, and walk all over her. Her persistence had turned out to be a miracle for me.

She laughs to herself. "I was obsessed with you *way* before you were aware of it."

The strange thing was, in that moment, it wasn't about Mabel - I really was just depressed that I had missed out on sixteen years of an affectionate family. But the way she looked at me with her undivided attention, her pupils wide, it sent my heart spiraling, and my mind took off on an entirely different route.

I leaned over and kissed her. Pressed her soft bottom lip between mine. Our noses rubbed. Feeling every fiber of my being surge with life, I went for a second kiss, with more pressure, and cupped her cheek with my palm.

But she wasn't doing anything. I drew back, and her eyes were still open. Her mouth was shut. She didn't look happy, or angry, or scared, or anything.

"I'm sorry," I breathed.

"It's okay," she said, her face softening. "I just... I like boys."

Right. Of course she liked boys - I knew that. I knew that, didn't I? All along. So why the fuck had I just kissed her? I jumped out of the bed and murmured that I should leave, just to reestablish control of the situation, to exorcise whatever had just taken over my body for a minute and tried to ruin as much of my life as possible in one action.

"You can't leave," she said from behind me, as I frantically searched the floor for my scattered

belongings, hurling stuff into my suitcase in no sensible order. "Pacifica." Mabel grabbed my arm and spun me around. "It's okay, really, I'm not mad at you, or anything. We can talk about this," she pleaded, eyes glazing over with tears. "We can talk about this."

I didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to be there, now, with her, because I needed time to process that she had become the best friend I once fell in love with and kissed and received a humiliating lack of reciprocation from. And the last thing I wanted to do was break down crying, but I did. I cried into her shoulder, into her neck, her hair. She whispered for me to hush, that it would be okay, we would be okay. She stroked the back of my head.

Eventually, the tears stopped. I pulled back from her and she wiped my eyes.

"Let's get some sleep," she said calmly. "We'll talk in the morning."

We never did.

I lay awake for hours that night, in her bed, my eyelids fluttering closed, carrying me off to sleep, and then I'd jolt to life again. I'd look over at the window, the moonlight spilling in, and mentally run through how easy it would be to slip outside and get a taxi back to the bus station in the city. If there were no late-night buses I would wait until sunrise.

Mabel was sound asleep within minutes of us lying down. I tried to tell myself that that wasn't because she had so quickly come to the conclusion that I would never be a potential match for her. But, really, if she had *any* interest in me at all, that kiss would have kept her awake just as it did for me.

We didn't talk over breakfast, or even look at each other. I went back to bed for a few hours. I wasn't sure what she did all day. None of it involved me. I hung out with Dipper for a while on their back porch, watching over the city's skyline, both of us buzzing with nervous energy; him because of the party that evening, me because I could turn any corner in the house and come face to face with the love of my life and our fractured relationship. All of my energy was wasted on avoiding her. I wasn't thinking ahead to the upcoming months I would undoubtedly spend crying in my room if we didn't return to normal by the end of my stay. If normal, as we knew it, was even a possibility.

Sunset came, and it was time to change into the zebra-print top I'd bought in the city a few days back. I paired it with dark skinny jeans that were likely cutting off all circulation to my legs. Didn't matter; I would die looking slim. I was applying mascara in the Pines' bathroom, focusing on my lashes in the mirror, and when I shifted an inch to the side I spotted Mabel hovering in the doorway. She had already changed - a red cardigan over a plain white tee and a dainty black skirt. She didn't avert her gaze and I wondered how long she had been standing there.

"What?"

"You look great," she said, matter-of-factly.

"Thanks. So do you."

When she turned away I let out the breath I had been holding. One brick knocked from the wall we had built between us. But she was confusing me, because when had I ever caught her watching me like that, in dead silence? *She's testing the waters*, my mind suggested. *She was looking at you just the way you've been looking at boys for the last two years, trying to feel something.*

Shut up, brain.

No, you shut up.

I was losing it.

The signals from Mabel got a whole lot less clear as the night went on. She drove us in the Jeep, up and down dimly lit hilly streets, until we pulled up in a cul-de-sac and walked to the large house at the end. For the whole journey Mabel teased her brother about a girl he had grown acquainted with and was worried about bumping into - an eccentric redhead. Figured. The house itself was difficult to see behind the thick oak trees planted out front, and we didn't even go inside at first. We were directed around the side of the house to the back yard by a kid who was far too enthusiastic for what he had been assigned to do.

One moment we were walking as a three, the next, we were swarmed by a horde of girls. Literally over the course of a few seconds, they emerged from the buzzing crowd and bounded towards Mabel like dogs at feeding time. There were hugs and squeals and other ghastly noises, the whole thing unraveling before me as a blur of colorful dresses, and when they finally stood still, I counted four of them.

And then they all turned on me, eight eyes, all on the outsider. Mabel put an arm around my neck and said, "girls, I don't even need to tell you who this is," and then, "Pacifica, this is Jessica, Sara, Elise, and Naomi."

Each of them waved or nodded as if this had all been rehearsed. I said, "hey," and apparently that was all the permission they needed to step up in my face and natter over each other, complimenting my hair, calling me pretty, asking me what life was like up north. I felt like the new exhibit at the zoo.

They were all so sweet - like four little clones of Mabel - but my god, they gave me a headache. I loved Mabel's endless supply of enthusiasm and glee, really, but in doses of five, it was a bit much. When Naomi had finished telling me her life story, from birth to breast-piercing, I took the opportunity to slip away and breathe in the unpolluted air in a quiet corner of the wooden decking surrounding the house. Even then, my eyes kept drifting back to Mabel and her friends, laughing in synchrony and touching forearms. It was strange. I had heard all of their names come up before, I knew of their existence, but playing out in front of me was a scene from a massive part of Mabel's life I had never witnessed firsthand. There must have been so much history between the five of them that I was outside of. My jealous tendencies seeped back into my veins. With them around, how could I possibly have been Mabel's best friend?

I'm not sure why I kept staring when her eyes found me. I could have easily pretended I was looking elsewhere - the yard was wide and she was at least twenty feet away. We were locked in place, a seemingly unbreakable connection formed across the grass and the sea of faces between us. She smiled; I didn't.

Eventually I turned and ducked inside for a drink. It was the absolute worst time to be out partying - my head was a mess and I craved nothing more than to lie down for a few days, away from Mabel, and figure out where to go from here. Or, ask myself why I had put my feelings out there for her to play with in the first place.

The thing was, I had kissed her with such confidence. Behind the make-up, beneath my immaculate hair, and beyond the habitual entitled strut, I wasn't a confident human being. Even with my emotions running haywire, I would not have kissed her if I didn't believe that, deep down, there was a chance she would have welcomed it. I had never had many friends, but I knew just from years of observation that the two of us sometimes pushed the boundaries of best-friend status. Even in the last few days I could recall her head on my shoulder, our fingers weaving together under a

blanket. The twinkle in her eye as she ran a hand through my ponytail and told me how beautiful my hair was.

And we had never talked about girls - dating girls, kissing girls. I had never brought it up, because I was afraid I'd stumble over my words and give away that I was madly in love with her and her alone. Was it possible that she had never brought it up for the very same reason? I thought about her warm, motionless lips, and her hands welded to her lap. Nope, that, last night, had made it abundantly clear that it was not possible. I shivered.

Then somebody tapped me on the shoulder and I spun around.

Mabel said, "hey."

I said, "hey."

"Sorry about my friends. I know they can be a bit much."

"It's cool," I said, and felt myself smirk.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just... I don't know, you've all known each other for years, so, even though I was out there talking to them, it still felt like I wasn't really... there."

She leaned on the kitchen counter and rocked around on the balls of her feet. "Don't you like them?"

"No, I do. They're all really nice. But I'm just not a part of that group. It's hard to keep up."

She nodded, but I could tell she didn't understand. One of the perks of being Mabel was that you could walk into any group of people and become one of them; they would all love you within seconds. *Oh, you guys are cannibals? That's cool. I mean, I don't think I'd ever eat human meat, but it's important to be proud of yourself and all of your quirks. You do you. Hey, does anyone want some Skittles?*

I continued, "I guess it makes me realize how much we still don't know about each other. You know, we live in totally separate worlds for nine months every year."

"I don't think there's *that* much we don't know about each other."

"You didn't know I had a thing for you," slipped out of my mouth, and I glanced down at the beer bottle in my hand, tried to recall how many I had drunk tonight.

A familiar scruffy kid walked into the kitchen, and I don't think I had ever been so happy to see him. I nudged Dipper in the chest with my beer, spilling a drop on his shirt. "Hey, how's it going with Aubrey?"

"Um, Amber," he said. "And good, I think. She just went off to the bathroom. I think I'm gonna try finding her just before the countdown. Only... an hour and twenty minutes to go."

"Cool, cool." I glanced to my side and saw that Mabel had disappeared elsewhere. My shoulders relaxed. "So you got any New Years' resolutions?"

We talked for about half an hour. He didn't question why his sister wasn't chaperoning me, like she had promised, which was good. A couple more beers and who knew what I would have started

spewing. When Dipper went off to stalk that girl again, I started wandering around the house by myself, wishing I wasn't there. I couldn't exactly leave - Mabel was my ride home and I had no idea what direction home was. When the twins had told me about the party, before I even left Gravity Falls, I was picturing us lounging on the beach after dark, campfires lighting up the shore, and fireworks reflecting off the water. In that fantasy, I supposed I hadn't factored in being stupid enough to kiss my best friend the night before. I had brought this on myself, really.

I found myself upstairs, fixated on this ridiculously high-tech bathroom lock. There was a screen, on the wall, telling me whether the bathroom was in use or not. And I thought, if technology had come this far, it wouldn't be long before somebody came up with a device that could erase the last twenty-four hours from someone's memory, and then I could make all the stupid decisions I wanted to. *Come on, science. Let's forget about bathroom locks and start focusing on useful inventions, please.*

The screen lit up green and the door swung open. A girl walked out and smiled. I scurried inside and locked myself in, then realized I didn't even need to pee, so I set my beer down beside the sink and went through the instinctual motions that followed seeing my reflection; I straightened my hair, reapplied chapstick. Thirty minutes to go. Maybe I'd be lucky and find someone to kiss at midnight - maybe even a girl. I was hundreds of miles from home, nobody knew me here. Nobody would remember.

But I ended up standing alone, in a stranger's living room, in the final minute of the year. Somewhere at the front, there was a TV broadcasting the countdown at Times Square, and the seconds until 2016 were being relayed across the room, with varying degrees of accuracy. By thirty seconds in, things had stabilized, and everybody was calling out the same number. I glanced around at linked arms, entangled bodies, and thought, *this is it. It's only downhill from here. Get ready for the loneliest year of your life.*

Fifteen, I think - it was at fifteen seconds that somebody grabbed my hand. My heart started racing, and when I saw the back of her head, those wavy brown tresses, and the red cardigan, luring me out of the dense huddle of teenagers, I nearly collapsed. My whole body surged with heat. Nameless faces became a blur in my peripheral vision.

And then, we were alone, in the hallway, tucked into a corner just by the foot of the stairs. Everybody had either flocked to the living room or were still outside. She took my other hand, looked at our feet, stepped closer. Our noses were an inch apart. I don't know why, but I started counting her freckles.

The chant continued in the other room, *three, two, one*, and then our lips were locked together. My hands jetted to her waist and rubbed at the fabric of her cardigan as I pulled her into me, my back straight against the wall. I felt her fingers knot my hair and tickle the back of my neck. My mouth tried to keep up with her voracious movement while my brain tried to comprehend how my wildest dream had become reality, literally overnight. After all that time I had spent sprawled out on my bed imagining it, all the sleepless nights, all the longing gazes across the room or through her webcam, I thought I knew what it would feel like when we kissed, when we both kissed one another. But I wasn't even close. This was like floating, the two of us floating in our own little bubble, the insignificance of the world fading away below us. And it was also realizing how much time I had wasted kissing boys all of my life.

It was about two minutes later that we parted, hearing voices head towards the hallway. They walked right by us. We were wrapped up in each other's arms, our breaths heavy. Her face was pink, her hair messy.

In a perfect world, we would have laughed, and carried on, and those two minutes would have been the start of something real, something huge for the two of us.

And I don't remember exactly how much it hurt when she said, "Pacifica, I'm not sure how I feel." Her eyes danced up and down my whole body. She took both of my hands again. "I mean, I don't know if I like girls. Or if I just like you. Or maybe I'm confused, I don't..."

I waited for her to say more. Something I wanted to hear. When it didn't come, I could have gotten angry at her, or walked away. But I reached unprecedented levels of empathy that night, and I told her it was okay. I had been confused, too, for a long time.

"Think about it," I told her, and kissed her one last time on the lips. I tried to pour every ounce of my being into that kiss, tried to force it into her memory, like saying *here's everything I have to offer. Do with it what you will.*

I slipped out of her grip, and walked away. The ball was in her court, now.

The drive home was quiet. As was the morning after, while I packed my suitcase. The only time we spoke was when I was drinking a glass of water over the sink. I spotted an ornate rock about a foot high jutting out of the ground in the back yard, and pointed to it. "What's that?"

"Pig grave."

"Huh."

Mabel drove me back to the bus station in San Francisco, and that was pretty quiet too. Everything that had transpired between us lingered heavy in the air, boxed in by four doors and windows. It was suffocating. I sat dead still in the passenger seat, like if I moved or made a noise Mabel would panic and swerve off the road. There was no music, no conversation, nothing to focus on but the silence.

She pulled up in the bus station's parking lot and I unbuckled my seatbelt. Mabel shut off the engine, sighed, and said, "you got everything you need?"

No, because you're not coming back with me. "I think so."

She nodded. I made no move to exit the car. I couldn't, not when things were like this. We ended up saying each other's names at the same time.

"You go first," she said.

I shook my head. "I was just going to, um... thank you. For letting me stay, and everything."

"Of course." Mabel swiveled to face me and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Listen," she said. "I never thought about... us, before. You and me. Not before the other night. But since then, it's all I can think about."

My stomach danced.

"I need time to think, but... maybe when I'm up there for the summer, we could try it. Like a date, I mean."

I nodded, trying to hide how much that meant. "Yeah. If you want to."

There was another long silence before we fell into each other's arms and kissed. Her fingers dug

into my hair and massaged my scalp, which was just about the greatest feeling ever. After a minute she pushed me away and waved her hands, saying, "go, just go. It's too hard." She lay her head on the steering wheel and smiled sadly.

I breathed in deep, tried to save the image of her in my mind. "Alright," I said, and stepped out into the humid air. I opened the back door and retrieved my suitcase. It was lighter than when I brought it; Mabel was constantly leaving random articles of clothing at my house in Gravity Falls, which I would often claim as my own and start wearing, so I had sprinkled a t-shirt and a sweater in amongst her things before I had left that morning.

"Miss you already," Mabel called out, and I smiled at her, and then she was gone. I watched the red Jeep as it pulled back into the street, and then disappeared behind a red brick building. I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry; on the bus, I did both.

I was still buzzing with energy by the time I returned home. My friend Layla drove me back to my house, and spent more time recounting the minor events I had missed in Gravity Falls than asking me how my trip had been. When I got inside, my parents were arguing loudly in the front room. They didn't hear me come in, so I tiptoed up the stairs and collapsed onto my bed.

One hundred and forty-seven days until summer, I counted.

Nine

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has left comments and kudos on this so far - it means more to me than you know.

Short chapter this week but a super-long one next week!

I don't see Mabel for a few days; our shifts don't coincide at the diner.

After digging up treasure under the water tower, we filled in the holes we had dug, to cover our tracks, and she gave me a ride home in her Jeep.

"We should exchange numbers," she said, as I was getting out of the car. "In case we ever need to swap shifts, or anything."

After a couple of seconds I said, "sure."

"Is your number the same as before?"

"Yeah. Is yours?"

"Yeah."

I just had to go into my contacts and unblock her.

The first of Nina's sealed cardboard boxes is now sitting by the door of our apartment. We're supposed to be out enjoying some early July sunshine, but Nina is sticking to a strict packing schedule which spans a couple of days. Her OCD is driving her to run back and forth through the living room, fretting over which of her possessions belong in which boxes, in what order, because Kyle's car isn't too big and she doesn't want to make more than one trip. I'm watching the whole spectacle from the couch. I *have* offered to help, more than once, but we decided that me recklessly handling her personal belongings is a sure-fire way to drive her insane.

"How's the roommate hunt going?" she asks me, folding shirts on the floor.

"I've already told you. I'm not looking."

She flumps onto the couch and sighs. "Are you *sure*, though? I don't want you to get lonely."

"I'll be fine, Mom. Really."

"Have you thought any more about living with Wendy?"

"No, because it's a bad idea. Come on, Nina, why are you trying to convince me otherwise? It would be a nightmare."

"She's not *that* bad."

"No, you're right, she's not. But she is slightly bad, and that's all it takes. Seriously, if she gets

drunk here, she's going to try and get me drunk, too. She doesn't think like you do, she doesn't see it as a real problem."

"You're right," Nina says, rubbing my arm. "I'm sorry. I just think that, surely, you're going to be better off having somebody here. I mean, if you... you know..."

"It's been four weeks. And I've never broken our promise, have I? I always tell you after it happens. Worse comes to worst, I can move back home for a while."

Nina's eyes widen in horror. "I thought you hated your mom."

"So did I, but we've been getting along lately. It's bizarre."

"Would you still get along if she knew you were an alcoholic?"

It was a good question. I've never told my mom about the booze - even back when it started, when I still lived at home. I was getting drunk every night, and she was none the wiser. We habitually avoided each other. We never talked except for rare idle chit-chat during the daytime. Her newfound desire to squeeze back into my life has had me all kinds of confused - maybe telling her about my problem would be a shortcut to finding out her ulterior motives; if she genuinely cares, she won't say, "that's nice, dear," and go on to talk about the last salad that she ate.

Speak of the devil, she turns up at the diner the following day, about ten minutes into my shift. Just walks in and sits down, even *smiles* at me when she passes the counter. I watch, dumbstruck. She has never set foot in what she once called "the town's greasy asshole," and now she is sliding into a booth without even wiping the seat down first.

I glance over at Mabel, who is behind the coffee machine. She looks as shocked as I do. "Is that your mom?" she mouths to me. I nod slowly.

I walk to her table and say, with great uncertainty, "hey, Mom."

"Hello, dear. I was just passing by, I thought I'd stop in for a chat."

I glance around the diner. Lindsay, who has recognized my mother, and who probably sees her as the literal devil considering the stories I've told her, is eyeing us like she's my big brother, gearing up for a fight. Lindsay would definitely win, too. There are biceps behind those blue sleeves and there's fierceness behind that soft face.

"Well I'm working, Mom. I can't really stop to talk."

"Oh, you work hard, don't you? I'm sure your boss can afford to give you ten minutes."

I look up at Lindsay, point at the seat opposite Mom, and shrug. Lindsay nods, almost unnoticeably. "I'll fix us some coffee," I say.

I'm amazed when she asks me how work is going, without reminding me that there are a million other career opportunities across the country that I could be devoting my time to. She even recognizes Mabel, and remembers her name, and calls her over to say hi. Mom probably says more to her in a minute than she ever did over the countless hours Mabel used to spend at our house, in the summers.

"Is that an engagement ring?" my mom asks Mabel, picking up her fingers and inspecting the ring as if she's about to give an appraisal.

"It is, yes," Mabel chuckles.

"It's *beautiful*. Who's the lucky man?"

"Um, his name's Jason," Mabel says, and I notice tentative eyes flick to me for a second. "We've been together for a few years now. He proposed last summer."

"Oh, I can only hope that somebody buys this one such a pretty ring one day," Mom says, tilting her coffee cup at me. "Actually, how does it work for you, Pacifica? How would you decide who proposes to who?"

"*Mom*," I growl.

"Oh- I'm sorry, does Mabel not- she doesn't know?"

"No, she- it's fine," I say, scratching the back of my neck. My cheeks go up in flames. "It's fine."

Mabel is quick to say, "I should get back to work," and she zips away.

Mom leans across the table and whispers, "is she a homophobe?"

"No, Mom, she's not a homophobe."

I don't think so, anyway. I don't think she knew I'm still into girls, either. Maybe she was under the impression that it was all a phase.

Like it had been for her.

Mom shoves her phone in my face and I lean back, so my eyes can focus on a picture of a tiny tabby kitten.

"Who's that?"

"That's Toby," she says, "the newest member of the family." She swipes the screen and brings up a picture of the cat in a bathtub, holding a dry sponge in its mouth. "Isn't he the cutest?"

"You bought a kitten?"

"Adopted. A stray cat wandered into Alice's kitchen and gave birth to *five* kittens behind her trash can. She kept the mother but she didn't know what to do with the babies. I said I'd take one off her hands. That's why I'm here - I was on the way to the pet store to buy him a cage. I hope he's okay out there," she says, glancing out the window at her car.

I frown. "Who?"

"Toby."

"Jesus, Mom, he's in the car?!"

Her eyes widen. "Is that bad?"

"Yes! You can't keep a kitten uncaged in your car, it's not a dog! And it's eighty degrees out, what were you thinking?"

Mom jumps up, overwrought, and hurries outside. I scamper along behind her, much to the restaurant's entertainment. Sure enough, there's a fuzzy little kitten plodding around in the front

seats of her car.

"Oh, he's fine, look - he's just playing with the gearstick."

"Yeah, he's also peed on the back seat."

"That's okay," she says. "I'll get the car washed on the way home."

"Right... you'll drop the cat off at home first, though."

"Oh. Yes. That's a better idea."

Mom swings open the passenger door, and I poise myself to catch a flying furball, but it walks into my mom's hands and she hands him to me. The thing mews incessantly in my arms, and I can't understand it, because it's a cat, but it's probably saying something like, *take me away from this woman*. I imagine that's what I was crying about when I was a baby. Mabel is watching us from one of the windows. I hold up the kitten and shrug, and she grins and clasps her hands together. It takes me a moment to realize I've totally tuned out whatever Mom is saying.

"...and he's already ruined two of my houseplants. He takes a few bites from his food bowl and then decides he'd rather eat leaves instead."

"You need something to keep him occupied. Buy a couple of cat trees and some toys while you're at the pet store," I tell her, setting Toby down on the passenger seat and closing the door. "And be careful driving with him running loose. Drive slowly, and try not to pass out at the wheel from the smell of cat piss."

Somehow, I end up agreeing to stop by the house in a few days time to check up on them. I don't know, I don't want a dead cat on my conscience courtesy of my hopeless mother. It's only when I'm watching her drive away through the windows of the diner that I consider that this whole thing - buying a pet and bringing it to my workplace - could have been an elaborate ruse to draw me back home, and try more of her recipes.

"You two are getting along a lot better," Mabel says to me in passing.

"Yeah. I'm not convinced that was even my mother."

I'll be honest - I don't really give a shit about fireworks.

I think I subconsciously associate them with things I never deemed worthy of celebration, like my dad making a successful investment in some random tech start-up, or my mom turning forty. It never took a lot for my parents to whip out the seemingly never-ending supply of fireworks they kept in the shed at the bottom of the yard. Nowadays, while I admit they are pretty, all I see over the flashing lights are my parents' smug faces, and all I hear over the explosions are their friends' horribly obnoxious laughter. It's a bit like PTSD.

To make things worse, every year Gravity Falls holds a fourth of July carnival, and every year it becomes more and more like a boring nightmare. Failing business-owners from all over town flock to a field to sell their wares behind wooden stands that are falling apart much like their lives. They all look like they've given up hope; one large woman is fast asleep in a plastic chair beside her display of jarred honey.

There's a helter-skelter that kids fly out the bottom of in tears because it burns the skin off their

elbows. There's a local band playing some kind of droning experimental music, which has also made one kid cry. And this is all before the sun has even set.

Nina loves all of it though, god knows why, so I plaster on my happy face for her sake as we walk aimlessly around the stalls. "It's the nostalgia," I tell her. "If you weren't leaving tomorrow, you'd be saying the same thing you say every year."

"Which is?"

"That this is just an opportunity for all the local lunatics to come together."

"But the lunatics have character," she sighs wistfully. "I'm going to miss it."

At about five minutes to 10, I lose Nina in the herd of people making their way to the observation area for the fireworks, because - I kid you not - I spot Mabel's fiancé arguing with one of those giant teddy bears. I can't make out a word he's saying; I look around me, but nobody else seems to notice that the man has gone insane.

Of course, when the bear comes to life and swivels around, I can see that, obviously, there is a human carrying it, and I feel like a fucking idiot. I watch Mabel take a few steps in the direction of the fireworks, struggling to keep the bear's giant feet from dragging along the grass, then she turns around and starts yelling at Jason as he pursues her.

I'm ashamed to admit that I derive a great deal of pleasure witnessing a hiccup in their relationship firsthand.

Even though I've had no contact with her for years, I've still heard things about her from time to time. Wendy still talked to both of the twins for a couple of years after their last summer here. And their names will come up sometimes among a group of people, none of whom I thought knew them. Apparently the Pines left a lot of footprints on the town.

I know that Mabel is in college, studying Social Work, and has undergone a year's internship as an assistant teacher at a special needs school. I know that she pursued her interest in theatrics after drama club in high school, and ended up playing a major role in a musical - someone showed me her name and picture in a playbill, but I don't remember the title of the play or the theater it was shown at. And I saw her on national news, once. She had about five seconds of screen time to explain how her and the equally-brightly dressed group flanking her were cleaning up after the ignorant oil companies that had yet again drilled a hole wherever the heck they felt like and wasted a bunch of turtles. I was in the ER at the time - my friend had broken her ankle. I jumped out of my seat and stood directly under the TV, staring up, waiting for Mabel to come back on screen, but she never did.

And I guess because of all that, I always pictured everything in her life going swimmingly, and it's comforting to see the ugly side for once. Don't let the smiley exterior and the social work and the preservation of our planet fool you - she deserves a bit of ugly.

Nina snaps me out of my trance when she finds me, and we walk to the top of the steep hill that juts out of the side of the field. We take a seat in the grass, and gaze into the night sky, waiting for the show to begin. We lean on one another's shoulders. I've given her a sufficient send-off, I think. I haven't fully come to terms with her departure, but I'm in a much better place than I was a few weeks ago.

Like I said earlier, I don't really care about fireworks, so when I happen to notice Mabel sit down with her teddy bear at the bottom of the hill, sans fiancé, my eyes are on her for most of it.

It's strange that I'm even able to empathize with her. From behind, I can see her sat hugging her knees to her chest. Her hair hangs loosely, almost to the small of her back, and lights up whatever color the sky is currently painted.

Considering that she's here without her parents, or her brother, or either of her uncles, I could take a photo of her next to that bear and title it *Loneliness*.

The trunk slamming shut screams finality, right into my ears.

"Are you *sure* you have everything?" I ask Nina, totally pointlessly.

"Yes, *Mom*," she mocks, and we squeeze each other in an aggressive hug.

"Did I ever tell you you're the best friend I've ever had?"

"Yes," she murmurs into my neck. "Lots of times."

We step apart. I'm cold.

"Call me," she says. "Any hour at all. I'm gonna leave my phone on at night now."

"I'll call you later when I'm drowning in whiskey."

She tilts her head and scolds me with her eyebrows.

"Kidding. The only thing I'm gonna be drowning in is *babes*. Now that you're gone all the rules are abolished. It's gonna be anything-goes in that apartment."

"And on that note, I'm going to leave now," Nina says, stepping around to the passenger side of Kyle's car.

Kyle's leaning on the driver's door. I say to him, "go on, Kyle. Steal my girl away from me."

He smiles, and says, "I'll take care of her," and then he gets into his car. I like Kyle, really, he's nice, but he certainly can't match Nina's standards of banter. Everything he says to me leaves me disappointed by how dull it is. Maybe that's a little harsh. Maybe I'll wait until my Nina-sized wound is healed before I judge him.

"I'll be back in a couple of weeks," Nina says, half in the car, half out. "Not two weeks, three weeks. Three weeks - that's a promise."

I don't say anything else because it feels like everything has been said. I watch them chug along down the street, though I can't see their heads through the bundles of Nina's belongings stuffed into the back seats. Seems ridiculous, now, that she yelled at me last night for stacking the boxes by the door in the wrong order. Kyle stalls the car at the end of the street, and I spoil my introspective moment by laughing, and then they disappear around the corner. I sigh loudly into the morning air and traipse back into my apartment.

I'm all talk - there are zero *babes* in my apartment that night. By 9 P.M. I'm on my couch with my laptop, scrolling through the highlights of other people's lives on Facebook.

It's scary how quickly the urges kick in. Keeping an alcohol habit at bay can be relatively easy when you're endlessly distracted, and having a best friend as a roommate certainly helped that. But when I'm alone, and I get bored...

I shut my laptop. There's a liquor store two blocks from here. I feel lonely, and bored. But I don't *have* to. I could feel warm, and fuzzy, and...

My phone rings. A spark of excitement hits me, somebody wants to save me, and I rush to answer it, the sad hermit that I am, until I see the name on the screen. It's been a *lifetime* since Mabel Pines has called me.

I hit the green button. "Hello?"

"Hey," I hear her say, cheerful as ever. My heart does a little flip when I match the voice to her face. "How are you?"

"I'm good," I say slowly. "You?"

"Yeah, fine. I think I've figured it out. The map."

"Oh," I say, no other words springing to mind.

"I moved the pieces around until they fit together, some of them I had to rotate. Once I'd done that I recognized it right away - it's the lake we used to swim in, with our little wooden dock. The X is on Scuttlebutt Island. You wanna go check it out?"

"Yeah," my mouth says without consulting my brain first. "Sure."

"Where are you?"

"What- you're going right now?"

"Yeah," she says, and I stand up and walk to the window. It's dark, as it usually is at night, but there's no wind, or rain, and it was warm out today. "Have you got anything better to do?"

I frown. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I'm literally asking if you have anything better to do."

"I don't know, sleep?"

"Okay," she sighs. "I guess I'll just... go out in the woods, in the dead of night, by myself... on a spooky island."

"You know, guilt-tripping me might have worked if I actually still cared about you," I say, and when she's silent I realize that was needlessly cruel. "I'm at my apartment."

"Great! I'll pick you up in ten," she says, then her voice is replaced by the flat tone informing me she has hung up.

I need a strong drink much more than when she called, but there's no way I could fix one in ten minutes. I change into some outdoor-suited clothes and smile; maybe at my next AA meeting I'll put everyone in touch with Mabel, the girl who can help people on accident.

Ten

In the summer that I was seventeen, I had my heart broken.

I've never been compatible with many people. I could blame it on my upbringing, I think - rich girls with every conceivable wish granted for them have little need for people - but it went deeper than that. There have been times, in the past, that I have drawn pleasure from repelling people away from me, and I don't understand it. How could I understand why I do something like that, instinctively? I've speculated that it's to prove to myself that I'm stronger on my own, that I don't need anybody to support me. And then other times, I've wondered if I push people away because I want them to chase after me. Everyone wants to be wanted, right?

Some people slip through the cracks in my defense, and those are the people that I've written about in this story. Andrew Vermont, who lived through tragedies he did not deserve. Nina Ryder, who was the first to insist that I had a drinking problem. And of course, Mabel Pines, who changed the world around me as I knew it for the better, and then for the worse. These people being few and far between, I tend to drop all of my eggs into their baskets, and become too dependent on their friendship.

Out of those three, I only ever fell in love with one of them.

In fact, out of all of the people on the planet, I've only ever fallen in love with one of them.

When we had kissed with our first breaths of a new year, and when we had kissed in her car on the following afternoon, Mabel had charged me with hope. When she came back to my home town that summer and never said a word about what we had done, she stripped all of that hope away.

The reason that I still resented her by the time she appeared in Greasy's diner four years later, is because I let that happen to me twice.

The first thing that was different about the summer I was seventeen was our hug when she arrived. It was shorter, less like an emotional reunion and more like going through the motions. It was totally foreign for us to spend that first day apart, but Mabel kept yawning and complaining that the journey had been tiring, and by 4 P.M. she had retired to the Mystery Shack to sleep. I went to my own bedroom and tried to wipe my memory of New Year's at the Pines household, I tried to forget what Mabel had said, *maybe when I'm up there for the summer, we could try it*, because whatever had happened between us was clearly no longer sitting well with her.

I tried to be understanding, and forget about it, and still be her friend. That was my first mistake.

The summer from there on out was just a game with my emotions. We'd go from hot to cold so quickly; one moment she would be brushing my hair with her fingertips, the next she would be lost in her cell phone, pretending not to have heard whatever I had just said. We would come so close to the way we used to be. We would sit under a blanket on my couch watching our way through the lowest-rated movies on Netflix and clutching our stomachs in laughter, and then the laughter would fizzle out and we'd hold eye contact for a few seconds, and she would look away, and her smile would go flat, and it would be over, like this was all my fault.

But what the fuck was I supposed to do? I wanted to scream at her, *Mabel, look at me*, I wanted her to tell me the thoughts that were racing through her head, if they were about us, which they clearly

were. But I was too scared to confront her, because whatever state we were in now, we would get through it, I thought, and that would be better than losing her for good.

A few weeks into summer vacation, Candy Chiu came back to town. She was one of Mabel's first friends in Gravity Falls, back before I even knew Mabel myself, but Candy had moved over to the east coast not long after they met. This was their first time seeing each other in four years.

We hung out together, all three of us, a few times. Then one day I was walking back from the grocery store and the two of them were parked in Mabel's jeep outside Yumberjacks. They didn't see me. I thought it was odd at first, that I hadn't been invited along, and since Candy had arrived in town I couldn't remember a single moment that Mabel and I had been alone without Candy around. As the days went on, my insecurities settled in.

I had been a bitch to Candy when we were younger, as I had been to a lot of girls and boys, but she didn't show any sign of resentment when we became reacquainted through Mabel. In fact, I thought we had been getting along well. On one of the first nights that she was here, I pulled her aside and apologized for how I had treated her in the past, and she had shushed me and said not to worry, that she could see I had changed, so I somewhat doubted that it was her who was excluding me.

I visited the Mystery Shack one day in late July, on a whim, and Dipper answered the door and told me that Mabel wasn't there - her and Candy had driven up to Eugene for the day, to go ice-skating, of all things. I didn't know what to say. I loved ice-skating. I wanted to call her and ask her what the hell was going on, ask her if she wanted to maybe be a little less obvious about shunning me, but I decided that out of the two of us, I could play the game of cold-shoulder way better than she could, so I ignored her texts and her calls for a week.

Well, I say a week - I ignored them for two days and then they stopped. Five days after that, I caved and turned up at the Mystery Shack again. Stan and Dipper and Wendy were all out front watching the sunset over the trees; I was greeted like family.

"Take a load off," Stan said, and tossed me a beer out of a cooler. I popped the cap on the metal arm of my chair.

Then Mabel came outside, in a tank top and the shortest denim shorts I had ever seen her wearing, said "hey," squeezed my knee, and sank into the chair next to me, like the past week hadn't existed in time.

So it was like I said - hot to cold, cold to hot, hot to cold, the seasons of our undefinable relationship.

It was a cloudy night in mid-August that Wendy gathered us all - myself, Mabel, Dipper, Candy - on the roof of the Shack, claiming to have an announcement in store. She stood so close to the edge that a gust of wind could have toppled her over, but nobody seemed anxious about that except me. Anyway, she didn't fall off, so it's not really relevant. We had one electric lantern between us at our feet, all of our faces lit from the bottom like a campfire huddle.

"So for the last year my dad has been restoring an old weathered lake house out in the forest, about an hour away from here, and I'm excited to say that he has finished in time for us to spend our last week of summer out there," she said.

Nobody made a sound.

"It's a thirty-second walk from the lake, it has a diving platform, the house itself is all newly

renovated, all modern furniture, there's a hot tub out on the front porch."

Mabel's hand shot up. "Will there be beefcakes provided in said hot tub?"

"You will have to provide your own beefcakes," Wendy said flatly, as I focused on a particularly green tree and swallowed my pain. "Come on, what's wrong with you guys? I thought you'd be more excited. We're gonna be totally parent-free, we can have parties up there every single night. And every day. One long party. It never has to end. It's gonna be *nuts*, guys."

It wasn't nuts. It was fun, and definitely relaxing, but it wasn't nuts.

We gathered at Wendy's house at lunchtime a couple of days later. Her dad made us all sandwiches, with beef cut as thick as a fillet steak. Candy, being vegetarian, slipped her slice to Mabel, who wolfed it down while Candy covertly chewed on her bread and butter. Our bellies full, we piled into Wendy's hippie van, our bags in the back, and hit the road. Then about an hour after hitting the road, we hit the bumpy dirt trail that would take us to her dad's lake house. It stretched for three miles, probably, growing narrower and narrower the closer we got. Riding shotgun, I flinched every time Wendy drove full speed at an upturned rock in the road, but somehow she never rolled the van or even popped a tire.

The house was beautiful. Smaller than I was expecting, but beautiful. Wendy pulled the van into a tiny driveway at the side of the building and we all jumped out and walked around to the front. There was about ten feet of lawn between the water and the wooden steps leading up to the porch, which had a set of wooden chairs, and the hot tub in the corner. The decking wrapped around one side of the house and I could see a barbecue at the very end - there was another set of stairs on this side that lowered into dirt and leaves, the very edge of the woods. Behind us, on a little wooden platform extending over the water, was a long wooden table with eight chairs, and tied to a post next to that, bobbing in the water, was a tiny rowing boat that I imagined was just for aesthetics; it looked like it would crumble to pieces if any of us stepped into it.

Wendy ascended the steps to the door, key in hand, and Mabel and Candy obediently followed, but I turned around and stared out at the lake. It was early afternoon, the sun was out, and I had to shield my eyes from the light reflecting off the ripples. I could see three other houses, on the opposite side, could even make out ant-sized humans laid out on deck chairs, kids running around with water guns. In the center of the lake was the diving platform that Wendy had mentioned. Dipper said from beside me, "it's beautiful," and I hummed in agreement, and I felt so warm inside in that moment, just happy to be there, grateful to be part of a tight-knit group of friends, regardless of wherever Mabel and I currently stood.

There were three bedrooms. I made sure to set my bags down in the master bedroom, alongside Wendy's, then I noticed that Mabel and Candy were already unpacking in the other double bedroom. As I walked past their door, Mabel looked up at me and straight back to her suitcase, in that hurried passing glance I had come to hate, like if she looked at me for too long she would catch something. There was a single bedroom downstairs, which Dipper took, adjoining a bathroom, and the rest of the lower floor was one open space - a lounge, with a corner couch and a couple of arm chairs facing a TV, and between that and the kitchen, a dining table.

We ate burgers off the barbecue that evening, out on the table set down by the water. Wendy devised a hilarious prank where she would channel her lumberjack strength and lift up our chairs with us still in them, and then swing us over the water like she was going to throw us in. By the end of the night Dipper was so tired of it that he waited until Wendy went off for a cigarette, looking over the lake, and then he crept up behind her and pushed her into the water. It was shallower than we expected, and I think he was worried that he had actually hurt her, until she clambered up onto

the grass, laughing, and I went inside with the other girls while the two of them wrestled on the lawn.

For a few days after that, everything was just fine. With Mabel in sight at all times, and her affectionate smiles my way, it was easy to believe that by the time she came back next summer, everything would have reset, and those nights over New Years' would have become a distant, forgettable memory. And I was never alone with my self-destructive thoughts up at the lake house - surrounded by people more energetic than puppies, even when I was lying back with my eyes shut, there was always something going on, something to listen to. Always distracted.

Then halfway through our vacation, we set off on a morning hike into the heart of the woods, and with Wendy's horrible navigational skills and our collective inattentiveness, we took a left when we should have taken a right, and that morning hike turned into a full-day expedition. We hadn't packed enough food or water to last into the afternoon, so everybody grew irritable with each other. We drank out of our hands, from a stream. We didn't have a map and, far from any civilization, our cell phones had no service. As the sun was beginning to set, occasionally blinding us through gaps in the canopy of trees, by pure chance, completely disoriented, we found ourselves at the side of the lake we were staying at. All of us looked between one another, silent, awestruck; we could see the little house we had locked up eight hours ago, just to the left of the lake. When the others started walking towards it, I knew I wasn't hallucinating.

As soon as we were back inside, we ravaged the kitchen for anything immediately edible, drank liter upon liter of water, and crashed out in the lounge, each of us sprawled out on the furniture in a different position, our eyes wide open. Anyone passing by the window might have thought we were dead.

"We could have died," I said, the silence growing too eerie.

Dipper cleared his throat, coughed, and said, "who would we have eaten first?"

"Wendy," I said. "She's got the most meat on her."

"Yeah right," Wendy said. "Like you scrawny little fucks could take me down."

Before long, we were all laughing again, and I don't remember whose idea it was, but a while later we were all laughing with beer bottles in our hands, a cooler open on the coffee table. Even Candy indulged; not a week ago I had heard her describe alcohol as "poison for the mind."

You were right about that, Candy.

We found that the hot tub was an effective cure for our aching legs. Wendy turned the heat and the bubbles right up until that was all we could feel, and it was so soothing that I just leaned back with my elbows on the edge of the tub and slipped in and out of consciousness. I listened to the splashes of water when people climbed in or out, but I wasn't keeping track of who remained, and when I eventually opened my eyes, only Mabel was with me, sitting on the opposite bench.

She smiled lazily. "Hey, sleepyhead."

I grinned and stretched my arms. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. I'm not a clock."

"Oh, okay, sassy," I said, and flicked water at her.

"My feet are so sore," she groaned.

"Your feet are sore? You spent two hours riding on people's backs. Get over yourself."

"Well I'm sorry, we don't all have freakish warrior feet like you do. Look," she said, holding her foot up above the water, her toe almost whacking my nose. "Look how tiny it is. It's pathetic."

When her foot disappeared below the surface again, I took a swig of my beer and said, "give me your foot."

Mabel tilted her head, but lifted her foot up anyway, and when I took it in both hands she giggled and yanked it away. "That tickles!"

"Grow up, Mabel. You're seventeen in two days."

"Ugh, fine."

I squeezed her foot a little harder, so she wouldn't squirm, and began to knead the muscles. I had only ever tried this with my own feet, after running, but Mabel only took a second to lean back and shut her eyes, with a hum of appreciation.

"Is that good?"

"Yes," she sighed. "Please keep doing that forever."

I tried to remember the last time we had been so intimate, but couldn't. What can I say? I was a seventeen-year-old closeted lesbian, with virtually no sexual experience and a through-the-roof sex drive. And I was in a hot tub with my girl-crush, and she was wearing a swimsuit, and I was tipsy, and her foot was in my hand and she was enjoying it so much that I got carried away, and my hands drifted to her ankle, then her shin, then her knee.

Her eyes flickered open, but she didn't move, so I kept going. I stepped over to her side of the tub, dropped one hand from her leg, and moved the other to her thigh. I was beginning to question how consensual this was when she lifted her wet palm to my face, and swept my hair behind my ear, and that was all the invitation I needed to kiss her but I didn't, because I was spellbound by her eyes, boring into mine, and then we heard the front door open and we fell apart quicker than the little rowing boat that Mabel had tried to sit in the night before.

Candy's head peered around the doorframe. She sang, "girls," and then, frowning, "what are you two doing?"

It wasn't accusatory at all, just curious, but Mabel let out a sharp, "nothing," and I very nearly slapped my palm to my face.

"Okay," Candy said, slightly taken aback. "We have pizza inside if you're hungry." She hovered in the doorway for a while longer, as if keeping an eye on us, and then shut the door.

Mabel's eyes met mine for half a second, then she stood up out of the water and said, "we should, um," gesturing to the house.

"Yeah," I said, but I stayed in the water long enough to watch the back of her thighs as she walked to her towel, escaping my grip. I didn't write Christmas cards, but if I did, Candy wouldn't be getting one that year.

The following night, Mabel and I slept in a tent. She disappeared sometime in the afternoon, and

when I went to look for her I found her rummaging in the shed behind the house. The door was open, but she was barricaded in by a lawnmower, which she kicked out of the way with no regard for its wellbeing.

"Look what I found," she said, waving around a slim green canvas bag, blowing hair out of her face. "It's a tent!"

"How long have you been back here?" I asked her, realizing I hadn't seen her since lunch.

"I'm not sure. An hour? There's all kinds of cool stuff in there."

I peered into the shed and saw an old barbecue, a rake, a broom, a couple of foldout chairs. Pretty standard for a shed, I thought. "I worry about you sometimes," I told Mabel.

"It fits two people," she said, reading the back of the bag. "We should sleep in it. Tonight. Do you want to?"

I wasn't even thinking about the possible implications of that; she was just in her childlike state, excited by the mundane. "I guess," I said.

"Yay," she squeaked, hugging the bag to her chest. She pointed at me and said, "this girl. That's why you're my favorite."

If I could reach back in time and slap that stupid grin off my face, I would.

We set up the tent about a hundred yards into the woods. It was smaller than I ever imagined a two-person tent being, and it was fortunate that we were both short, otherwise our legs would have been jutting out of the entrance all night. I made a passing comment about this being bear country, and when I came out of the lake house later that evening Mabel had moved the tent to the foot of the steps around the side of the porch.

She was hammering in the last peg. "So we have an escape route," she told me, out of breath. "From the bears."

When darkness fully consumed the lakeside, Mabel was both determined to light a fire, and shit at lighting fires, which was a dangerous combination. I sat on the grass, gazing wistfully at our pile of sticks and leaves, while she bashed two rocks together. Wendy leaned out of one of the lounge's windows and offered us her lighter, but Mabel shut her down.

"I don't think it's working," I said, about ten minutes in to the hopeless exercise.

"Yeah," she sighed, and threw the rocks over her shoulder. They made a *plop-plop* in the lake.

We lay on our backs in the tent and ate marshmallows out of the bag. We didn't have any sleeping bags, so we sandwiched ourselves between two comforters that we'd found in a closet along with a couple of pillows. It was strange that we had things to catch up on, though neither of us directly acknowledged that we had put distance between each other all summer.

"It's so peaceful out here," Mabel said, after a particularly long silence.

"Mhmm."

Then, quickly, as if she had been bottling it up, she said, "do you ever think there's more to life than doing what everyone tells you to?"

I turned my head; I rarely saw her look so solemn. "What do you mean?"

"Like... I'm supposed to apply to colleges soon. I'm supposed to, because my parents always said I would, and because I haven't thought up any alternative. But I don't even know what I'm gonna major in. I'm supposed to go to college, for three or four years, I'm supposed to move out of my home, and then what? I'm supposed to get a job and work until I die." She tilted her head toward me. "There must be more to life than that, right?"

"Well... sure," I said, trying to hide my shock. Mental breakdowns were supposed to be my thing. "Your life isn't defined by what job you have or what you major in. Think about your hobbies, your friends. Your relationships."

"What if I don't even want to go to college? What if it's just been ingrained in my mind by my parents and my... what if I'm only applying because it's what's expected of me?"

"Then don't go," I said, leaning on my elbow and looking down at her. "I'm not. And it's not like this is now or never, either. You can wait a year, or two, or three, do whatever you want. It's not-" I stopped. "Can you hear that?"

I thought I heard shouting, coming from inside the house, and I strained my ears, worrying that someone was hurt, but then I heard a very feminine moan, followed by a *shhh*, and I looked back at Mabel, whose eyes widened in horror as she sat up.

I fell back to my pillow, bursting into laughter. "Your brother's getting laid," I told her.

We fell silent again, to listen, and heard a distinct grunt from the upstairs window, closest to us, the room that I would have been sleeping in tonight and was now very hesitant about sleeping in ever again.

"This isn't funny," she said, shaking my arm.

"Oh, I think it is."

"It's not! Is that Wendy or Candy?"

"Wendy. Candy wouldn't be that loud."

"Oh my god. Oh my *god*, I have to stop them," she said, reaching for the tent's zipper.

"What?!" I tugged her arm, and she landed with half of her body on top of me.

"She's too crazy for him," Mabel whispered harshly. "She'll break his heart."

"Okay, how bad do you think Wendy is? If you go up there right now and interrupt them Dipper will never speak to you again." I added, "they've been friends for years, she's not gonna hurt him," and then thought for a second how that could easily apply to what we were going through, and suddenly I wasn't so sure that Wendy wouldn't hurt him, inadvertently.

I think Mabel, still hovering above me, noticed the crack in my smile, and she said, "what?"

"Nothing," I lied. Then I smirked. "Just imagine what she's doing to him."

Mabel groaned and slumped back into her own side of the bed, covering her ears with the pillow.

I said, "she must be giving him the time of his *life*," and a short while after we had stopped laughing, I fell asleep.

The next day, I ruined the surprise party.

Is that too vague? Okay, let me be a little more transparent:

It was about 8 P.M., on our penultimate day at the lake house, and I was crouched behind an armchair, thirty-odd people around me. Candy had taken the twins off to the nearest town for their birthday dinner, and Wendy and I had faked food poisoning all day to avoid it. We used the time wisely to direct invited guests - mostly friends and acquaintances from the Sherville Factory, and a handful of friends from California that were able to make the drive - to a makeshift parking lot we had set up further into the woods. We didn't want anybody parking on the road leading up to the house, so we played Tetris with people's cars, slotting them in between trees. It was an impressive feat - only one person lost a wing mirror.

So I was behind this armchair - we had received the two-minute warning from Candy - and all the lights were off; we could still just barely see in the pale moonlight. And I shit you not, the most horrifying monstrosity of a spider was chilling out on the wooden floor, inches away from me, inches away from a guy crouching below a window. I think I broke into a sweat when I spotted it, but I was fine, really, it was fucking *huge*, but I was fine. Dipper was pulling up in Wendy's van right then - two beams of light shot through the windows and onto the opposite wall. But of course, spiders can't fully comprehend the nature of surprise parties, and this particular eight-legged terrorist decided to run at my foot and crawl up onto it.

Well, I was wearing sandals, and I didn't care whose party it was, I wasn't going to let that thing have its way with my toes, so I screamed, stood up, and started flinging my foot around. The lights went up - god knows what everybody was thinking, but at the time I didn't care. I looked down and its fuzzy mass was still sitting on my foot, treating the whole thing as a fairground ride, so I started kicking the back of the chair, over and over and over, until all that was left was a wreckage of guts and limbs, and that was still pretty gross, but at least it wasn't gross and alive.

I'm sure you've felt it before - all eyes on you, and you'd rather be anywhere else. It was *almost* funny, if only I had been able to overcome the crippling embarrassment. Candy, Mabel and Dipper had opened the front door at some irrelevant point of my outburst. There were a couple of half-hearted shouts of *surprise!* but the first person to move was Wendy, who dragged a hand across her face and slumped against the wall.

"Spider," I explained to the room.

I had to hit the drink hard if I wanted any chance at enjoying myself for the rest of the evening. A half hour into the party, I was already pouring my third rum and Coke, and although I eventually slowed down, when it comes to my capability to make sensible decisions, any amount of alcohol is too much. So, I'll forgo a long description of the party - I caught up with people from the Factory, I played some drinking games - and I'll get to *that* part of the story now, the part I've been building up to, the part where my life began to self-destruct.

Roughly a third of our guests had taken off already. I think it was nearing midnight. I had just come out of the bathroom, having reapplied my lipstick, but I was pretty drunk, and no length of time in front of the mirror would have helped me determine whether I had been able to paint within the lines or not. Mabel had just come inside through the back door in the kitchen. I smiled at her friends as they passed - the ones from back home, Naomi and Elise, though I couldn't remember which was which - and Mabel stepped towards me and pushed me against the side of the staircase, a glass in her hand, drunker than I had ever seen her.

"Hey," she said, smiling warmly. Innocently, even. I noticed that her fingers were playing with the necklace I had given her that morning - a silver dolphin, with a tiny cut of faux sapphire for an eye.

"Hey yourself." I took the swaying glass from her hand and placed it on the sideboard next to the stairs. "I'm just going to set that down here," I told her, and she didn't argue.

"I haven't had a chance to thank you," she said, oddly coherent, and gestured to the living room. "For all of this."

I shrugged. "Wasn't just me. Wendy put together most of it."

"Yeah, but... you're always planning things for my birthdays. And I feel so bad because I'm never here for yours."

"That's okay. I like our little Skype parties, anyway."

She gasped. "Oh my gosh! Don't move. There's a spider in your hair."

"Funny."

She grinned. "I thought it was pretty funny. Where have you been all night? You haven't been hiding from my friends, have you?"

"I've been hiding from you," I said, and I think I meant it as a joke, but it didn't quite come out that way. It felt only natural that intoxication would quickly lead to confrontation.

Mabel frowned. "Why have you been hiding from me?"

"Because that's what we do now, isn't it? We hide from each other."

Mabel gazed off to the side, into the party, and looked back at me, the smile wiped from her face. "I don't want it to be that way."

"Really? Because it feels like you've been doing most of the hiding."

It was pretty clear, then, that she didn't have anything to respond with.

"I'm gonna go upstairs," I said. "I think I need to lie down. I think I've had too much to drink," and it wasn't until I was halfway up the stairs that I realized I was now the one hiding.

And I think I remember feeling like I didn't want to see her ever again. It didn't matter how much time we had spent apart that summer, I still got that awful, wonderful, sinking, fluttering feeling in my stomach whenever I saw her, and time only intensified it to the point that it was unbearable. And yet when I slipped inside the bedroom that Wendy and I had been sharing, I left the door ajar, because I wanted Mabel to follow me. It's like I said, everyone wants to be wanted.

I didn't switch the lights on; there was enough moonlight to guide me to the window. I looked out into the dense woods, then down at the tent we had spent the night in. I listened to bassy music pump through the floorboards, and to normal people that were actually capable of enjoying themselves at a time like this, and tears began to stream down my cheeks.

I could see the slat of light through the crack in the door, reflected in the window, so I saw it expand, and a shadow fill its width. I turned around and there she was, stepping into the room, shutting the door behind her, unknowingly fueling my bewitching behavior. She walked half of the room toward me and stopped, the moonlight illuminating her rosy cheeks and her wide eyes,

taunting me, really, by highlighting how beautiful she was.

"Why are you crying?"

I folded my arms and leaned back against the window. "That's a stupid question, don't you think?"

"Okay," she sighed, taking another step. She looked irritated, now. "Let me say it again: I don't want things to be like this."

"And *I* have been trying to keep myself together and make sure things aren't like this. But I can't do it anymore."

"Can't do what anymore?"

"*Why* do you have to act so naive?" I snapped, advancing on her. "*You* said we would talk about this. About us. *You* said we could *try* it, try to be more than friends, and from the moment you got here you led us in the totally opposite direction. I would have been fine, eventually, if you had told me outright that it wasn't going to happen, ever. I could have gotten over that. But instead we've spent all of our summer coming close to how things were over Christmas, and then you've turned around and looked at me like I was something nasty on the bottom of your shoe."

"Really?" she said, crossing her arms. "That's how you think I've been treating you?"

"What do you mean? That's not what I think, it's what you've been doing. It's a fact."

"Then kiss me," she said, her eyes fierce.

"What?"

"What, you think I'm gonna freak out? You think I'm gonna run out of the room with my arms flailing? Kiss me."

I felt my cheeks flare up. I didn't move, obviously - the whole thing suddenly felt like a fever dream.

"Here, I'll make it easier for you," Mabel said, her voice low, and she closed the distance between us, threw her arms around my neck, and we started to mix our shades of lipstick.

Looking at the girl, you wouldn't have pictured her capable of such ferocity, but she started to claw at my shirt like she had a personal vendetta against Forever 21, and after I paused to take it off, her nails were harsh against my bare back.

Even as it was happening, I knew that this wasn't our great big romantic breakthrough. Her lips felt colder. She wasn't as gentle. We were acting on impulse, lust more than love, and the whole moment felt darker than it had done on New Years' Eve, like we weren't as close and we knew we would never be. But when fantasy stares you in the face, you don't say *hold on a minute*, you don't search beyond it for the negative consequences.

We started at the foot of the bed, and by the time we had wriggled our way up to the pillows, every last item of our clothing was somewhere on the floor. When our lips broke apart our breaths were so heavy that I might have been hyperventilating. She was leaning over me, our bodies tangled up like a game of Twister, and beads of sweat glued a few strands of hair to her forehead. I never knew what her eyes meant, never knew what was on her mind, but she began a trail of kisses down my abdomen, making a rest stop at my breasts, and when she reached the spot between my legs I leaned back, let the pillow envelop my head.

I remember watching her for some time, focusing on the top of her head, buried there in the nook between my thighs, and then I tried not to watch, and focused all of my willpower on making this last as long as I could. I gripped the sheets, fastened my eyes shut, tensed all of my muscles, but it must have been less than a minute before my body shuddered and I knew it was over. She re-emerged and kissed me, and we rolled over and I returned the favor.

And the whole time, not a word was said. Our ferocity burned out. We cleaned up what we could and pulled the comforter over us. Downstairs, Mabel's friends would be leaving, and looking for her to say goodbye, blissfully unaware that she was dozing off behind a locked door tangled up in another girl's arms. I suppose all of the warning signs that she would run from me in the morning had been thrust in my face, but I chose to cling onto hope while we fell asleep, our naked bodies cuddled together.

When the sun woke me, I was alone. I sat up fast, which was a mistake. My head felt like a local demolition crew had used it in place of a wrecking ball overnight. I looked to the floor and her clothes were gone, the door was closed. There was no evidence of anyone having spent the night with me. I dug around in my suitcase for the last clean set of clothes I had packed, then tiptoed downstairs.

It was eerily quiet. I did a sweep of the bottom floor, but all I found was Candy, passed out on the corner couch with lopsided glasses and a frizzy hairdo. The door to Dipper's room was wide open, and I spotted the same green bra that Wendy had been leaving all over my possessions all week, resting on the bed. She had spent the night here, clearly, with or without realizing that her own room was otherwise occupied. Upstairs, I peered into Mabel and Candy's room, and my heart stopped, because I couldn't see any of Mabel's clothes, or her bags, I couldn't see that stuffed tiger she carted around everywhere, or her perfumes, or her deodorants. Two toothbrushes were missing from the bathroom. My foot slipped on another of Wendy's damn bras as I scrabbled back into the hallway and hurried back downstairs.

No, I thought. *She wouldn't*. But she had - they both had. On second inspection, now that I was fully awake, none of Dipper's belongings were left in his room either.

I paced about the lounge, dialing Mabel's number, dialing Wendy's number, and neither of them picked up. I called Dipper, he answered, and while I was panicking I was somehow considerate enough to keep my voice low so that Candy could continue her snoring.

"Where are you guys?"

"We're at the Shack," he said. "Just starting to pack up. Is everything okay?"

Agony gripped my forehead; I keeled over and pressed my hand against it. "I didn't think you were leaving until tomorrow."

"We're going back early with Elise and Naomi - Mabel's friends. I thought Mabel told you?"

She didn't tell me *shit*. "You didn't say goodbye."

"Mabel told me you were fast asleep. I'm sorry," he said gently, "I didn't want to wake you up."

"She didn't say goodbye either."

"She told me she said goodbye last night. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, Dipper, I'm fine. Ask your *sister* if she's okay, but don't expect an honest answer," I spat, and I regretted it as soon as I hung up. It wasn't his fault.

Perfectly on cue, I heard the van pull up outside, and I darted out the front door. Wendy was walking up to the porch and, irritatingly casually, she said, "and then there were three."

I threw up on the lawn, then, which was a horribly impolite way to thank Wendy and her dad for letting us stay in their pristine lake house all week, and instead of acknowledging the pond of vomit, I spewed forth most of what had happened, omitting the part where Mabel and I had slept together, and Wendy told me that she, too, was under the assumption that Mabel had told me about her early departure.

"I have to talk to her," I said. "I can't let her leave yet. Can you drive me back into town?"

"What about Candy?" she said, glancing uncertainly at the house.

"She's asleep. I'll text her from the car. Please, Wendy. I'll never ask anything of you ever again."

So we sped down the I-5, back towards Gravity Falls. I hurled spearmint gum into my mouth because I hadn't brushed my teeth before we left, and when I got around to screaming in Mabel's face I would need her to take me seriously. All the way there my foot tapped restlessly on the floor, *thump-thump-thump-thump-thump*, and we didn't turn the radio on to drown it out. There was a swelling pain in my gut and I came close to tears at least three times. I noticed Wendy glancing at me from time to time, and I didn't know if she had figured it all out, the extent of my turmoil. A couple of years from that moment I would tell Wendy the full story - all the way back to that night on my balcony, with the fireworks, and the grapes, and how I think I fell in love with Mabel's laugh then and there - and Wendy would not react with an ounce of surprise.

Right on the outskirts of town - *so close* - half of the road was fenced off, for construction, and we pulled up at one of those traffic lights that really, really take the cake. We sat there at the light, in the ass-end of nowhere, for a good two minutes, while a stream of cars passed us going in the direction that was, to this traffic light, far more important than wherever the hell we were going.

I bit my nails and gazed out into the forest, over and over, considering it. I knew that somewhere, not even that far into the woods, the Mystery Shack would be welcoming the morning's round of tourists, and my one night stand would be packing her bags to skip town. I took one last look at that merciless red light, swung open the door, shouted to Wendy that I'd call her, and I sprinted into the woods. To the cars behind, it probably looked like I was escaping my kidnapper.

I turned slightly to the right, then ran straight, bringing up a map of the town in my head. If I was lucky, I would land on Pines property. If I was unlucky, I would end up at the town's lake, and I didn't possess the same kind of determination as Forrest Gump - I was more likely to throw myself in the lake than turn back and keep on running.

I was lucky. After a minute the trees were spaced further apart, and I caught a glimpse of the gabled roof. Then I was standing in the parking lot out the front of the building, catching my breath. I turned to my right and Mabel's jeep was still there, and there was a smaller, cream-colored car parked behind it. I noticed there were people in those cars, staring at me. Naomi in the passenger seat of the Jeep, Elise in the driver seat of the car behind. Or maybe it was Elise in the Jeep and Naomi in the car behind. I ran a hand through my hair, like that would fix whatever running against the wind had done to it, and I thought, *fucking hell, how has my life come to this?* I used to be a fucking princess. I used to be town royalty, turning heads wherever I went because of my beauty and my clothes and my wealth, and now I was chasing after girls, sweaty and unbathed, just another town kook.

I ignored the girls in the cars and ran for the front door, and halfway there, Mabel stepped outside, lugging a suitcase behind her. She saw me and dropped the case at her side, nearly crushing her

toes. I stopped at the foot of the stairs to the porch. She looked as messy and exhausted as I did; I knew that for her, leaving the Shack as fast as possible was just as important of a mission as it had been for me to get here. And still I wasn't angry, yet. I was hanging on to hope that this was a misunderstanding, and that she would come down the steps and kiss me, and that... what? Then what would happen?

She picked up her bag and heaved it down the steps, dropped it in the dirt. At eye-level now, she said, "I need to apologize."

Like we were co-workers, or something, and we'd drunkenly kissed under the mistletoe at the Christmas party. Hope: Robbed. "But you weren't going to," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "You were going to get in the car and leave."

She looked at the ground, and back up at me. "I don't know if there's anything I can say that will make this better, Paz. I think it's better if I just leave," she said, and she tried to slip past me, fumbling with the suitcase, but I grabbed her arm and stopped her.

"*Why?* I don't understand."

"Because I've been awful to you," she said, her voice cracking. "So, so awful."

"It's okay," I told her, shaking my head. "We have feelings for each other, that's fine, but we have to talk about it. You can't keep kissing me and running away afterwards."

"I do have feelings for you, but I-"

"Then look at me." I was practically begging. My hands had found their way into hers.

She looked up, tears obscuring her eyes, and there was this thick, unnerving silence, totally uncharacteristic of the woods - there was always the wind lashing at the trees, or a bird chirping, or a woodpecker. And Mabel said, "I have a boyfriend," and the silence was replaced by a high-pitched whining in my ears. I think my face must have drained of blood. She kept talking - her boyfriend was back in California, she would see him tonight, she was so, so sorry, and the morning caught up to me. I hadn't eaten, I had expelled the contents of my guts as soon as I got up, I had run through the woods to hear something I had never wanted to know, and my heart had beaten as much in two hours as it normally would in a week. I wanted to lie down in the grass and go to sleep.

I drew back my hand and slapped her, as hard as I could. She recoiled, used the suitcase to keep her balance. Her eyes were wide and her hand covered the red mark on her cheek. I heard footsteps pounding on the gravel, somewhere behind me.

"I'm sorry," was the last thing Mabel Pines said to me. She walked out of my view, and for a while I couldn't turn around. The last of my energy had been sapped out of me. When I did turn around, Naomi-or-Elise was helping Mabel to the Jeep, carrying the suitcase, and giving me a dirty look over her shoulder that seemed a little audacious given that she didn't know the first thing about our situation. Or maybe she did. Maybe Mabel had told her. It wasn't like I knew anything about my best friend anymore.

At some point between the moment that Mabel started the engine to her Jeep, and the moment that she pulled out onto the road into town, my feet propelled me forward. I ran after her, the other Naomi-or-Elise stood alert beside her own car, and maybe she called after me but I wasn't sure because the wind was howling in my ears again.

All I wanted to do was return a fraction of the damage Mabel had done to me. The road was dead straight; I had a pretty clear shot. As the cherry-red car sank further into the horizon, the perfect, cloudless blue sky, I picked up a rock from the side of the road and hurled it, and it landed in the road twenty feet in front of me, with a pathetic, distant *thunk*. I fell to my knees on the hot tarmac, and punched the road until my knuckles bled.

Eleven

I don't know why I brush my hair. I don't know why I put on lipstick. I don't know why, at the last minute, I swap out my tattered long-sleeved tee for a collared shirt and a black sweater. It might be an innate reaction to a pretty girl's impending arrival on my doorstep. I dab at my lips with a sheet of toilet paper, so the lipstick doesn't look freshly applied, and frown at myself in the mirror. I suppose I just admitted that I still find Mabel pretty. I suppose I'm dressing up nice for a girl who is not only engaged to a man, but who is also demon spawn.

I grip the edge of the sink and groan. I run some hot water, scrub the lipstick off completely, and ruffle up my hair. Better. Alright, I'll brush my hair again. Just the hair. Everything else remains un-groomed.

The doorbell rings and my heart jumps. Again, instinctual reaction. If the doorbell rings and I'm over the sink it's usually because I'm about to go on a date, and I'm expected to act like a functional woman for a few hours.

I open the front door and there she is, in all of her beautiful awfulness. Her hair is tied back and her breath is minty and, wow, she's dressed for a date more than I am - denim jacket over a stripy red and white t-shirt, tight black pants. We're still wandering around the woods looking for treasure maps, right? Maybe by Scuttlebutt island she meant she was going to scuttle into my butt-

Jesus. Okay. No need to let thoughts like that run loose in my head.

"Hey," she says, peering over my shoulder and surveying the room. "Nice place."

She's not coming in, if that's what she's thinking. "My dad pays for it," I tell her.

She's silent to the bottom of the stairs, then she says, "that's nice of him."

I hesitate before I get in Mabel's car, because it feels like stepping into a younger version of myself as well. I hoist myself into the seat and as soon as I sit down, on the backdrop of my pitch black street, I can see the sun set over San Francisco, like it was only yesterday. Those days that I'll never forget, with the car and the girl that I thought I had lost forever.

Mabel physically makes me jump when she speaks; it really makes me worry sometimes how I can so easily drown in my own thoughts.

"I didn't bring the map itself," she says, "in case it rains. But I took a picture."

Her phone's screen lights up the interior of the Jeep as she holds it between us.

"This is the drawing I did of the solved puzzle... and *this* is what the lake looks like on Google Maps. See? They match up perfectly. The rectangles around the edges are just the docks."

"And you're sure you drew the X in the right place?"

"I think so," she breathes. "I tried to draw my map to scale with the jumbled up one. I used a ruler and everything." Hyperactive as a toddler, she dives her hands into the back seat. "I didn't know what to bring. I brought the shovels. And a crowbar," she says, holding up - yep, a crowbar, and nearly knocking me unconscious in the process.

"Bear mace?"

She grimaces. "Will there be bears?"

"I have pepper-spray in my purse. That'll do. I can also use it when I get sick of you."

"Who could get sick of me?" she quips, starting the engine and flashing me a grin.

And, shit, if seventeen-year-old me could see me smiling back, she would knock me out cold. Mabel swings the car around, out of my street. I relax into the seat, glance at the time, glowing orange on the dashboard - 10:09 P.M. I look up at the road ahead, under the headlights, and I'm still smiling because it feels like the start of an adventure. Maybe I'm just happy to be out of the house, like the forever-bored dog that I am.

When we reach the lake, the headlights bounce off of the water, right alongside the moon's reflection, until Mabel shuts off the engine. I frown. I must be braindead, because I hadn't considered the water being an obstacle to our destination until now. "Do you have a boat?" I ask Mabel.

"We're borrowing Soos' boat," she tells me. "Did you know he's afraid of water? A jellyfish stung him in Hawaii and now he doesn't trust it."

I nod, like that's pertinent information to me, and we gather up Mabel's treasure-hunting gear from the back seat, and head around the back of the fishing shop where all the boats are docked. Soos' speedboat is the biggest here, but it certainly doesn't look the flashiest. Or safe. At all. In fact, the wooden planks boarding up the centre of its exterior suggest that at one point it was two halves of a boat. But Mabel hops on board, dropping her shovel and crowbar on the floor, and the boat doesn't sink under the weight.

She notices my apprehension and holds out her hand. "Need a hand?"

"No," I say sternly. I opt to leap the foot-wide gap between the dock and the boat, and somehow I still catch my foot, and my body slams face-first into the cushioned seat. I sit up quickly, as if the person standing right next to me might not have seen or heard my stumblebum entrance.

There's a tiny, half-open cabin at the front of the boat with the wheel and the engine controls. Mabel rummages in a footlocker and pulls out a life jacket. "Can you still swim?" she asks.

"Yes, I can still swim."

"As well as you can board a boat?"

I scowl. "Throw me overboard and find out."

"I'll take your word for it." She stows away the life jacket and steps behind me to untie the boat from the dock. She moves back to the cabin and while she's starting the engine, I have a moment to jump back to shore, if I so wish. Now that I'm over the initial excitement, the reality sets in that I am bobbing on the water, sailing into the wilderness in the dead of night. But I realize I find that more enticing than lying awake in my lifeless apartment, so the boat starts to move and here I am again, blindly going along with whatever Mabel's excitable head comes up with, just like old times. I watch her ponytail sway to one side in the gentle wind. The part of me that finds her intriguing never died, it would appear. It was just lying dormant.

For a minute I gaze out over the water, my eyes searching for the abandoned fishing dock, but I can't pick it out in the darkness. I notice Mabel glancing in its direction, too, and hate that my heart rate picks up remembering the night we slept there. Neither of us say anything.

Then she's sitting at my side, clasping her hands in her lap, mimicking my position.

"Shouldn't you be steering the boat?"

"Cruise control," she says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

When she smiles, I start to realize how dangerous this is. I don't mean the boat, or the remote island. I mean spending time with her. It's like the closer she sits to me, the clearer I can see the moon in her chocolate eyes, the less those days after we cut ties seem to matter.

"So, how have you been?"

I laugh without meaning to. "You mean for the last four years?"

"Sure," she says. "Gotta start somewhere."

"I've been... terrible. Then terrible, again. Then a lot better. And now... somewhere between terrible and fine. You?"

She twists her mouth in thought. "I've been okay."

I nod, then shake my head. Can't work out if I care or not. "Glad we got that out of the way."

"How long have you been working at Greasy's?"

"A couple of years."

"You enjoy it?"

I shrug. "Yeah. Can't complain. It pays well, and I haven't figured out yet whether I have bigger ambitions than serving breakfast to people. You're still in college?"

"Uh-huh. My final year starts in September. I just finished my internship. I worked at a school down in Oakland for special needs kids. Which was great, but too great, and now I want to go back there instead of finishing college."

"Where'd you meet Jason?" Great, because *that* was the next logical point in the conversation. The hell is wrong with me? Hold fire, Pacifica. No need to start an argument and end the night with one of us on the bottom of the lake.

"He worked at this coffee shop me and my friends used to go to during lunch. In high school, I mean."

If there was any doubt that Jason was the boy Mabel cheated on on her seventeenth birthday, there isn't anymore. She looks a little abashed, but I let out another involuntary laugh, because I had Jason pegged as an independent coffee-house snob since the first moment I saw him.

Mabel looks up at me and half-grins, like she missed the joke. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," I say, forcing a straight face.

She's about to speak but we both lurch forward, and I grab onto her arm to stop myself sliding off the seat. Mabel jumps up and switches the boat's engine off.

"What the hell was that?" I ask her, trying to remember if I *can* actually swim because the boat must be sinking.

"We're here," she proclaims, vaulting over the side of the boat and splashing into shallow water. I peer over and it's up to her ankles.

"Have you beached the boat?" I squint ahead but all I see is a black void - the thick forest under the sky. I can just about see the shore, either side of us, logs and rocks scattered along it. It's no wonder we crashed - to the human eye, this place barely exists at night.

"Yeah, but it's fine. The front of the boat is hardened. I've crashed it loads of times."

I take her calm tone at face value and stop worrying. I pass Mabel the tools and her backpack, then stare down at the water's surface. "My shoes aren't waterproof."

"Neither are mine," she chuckles.

"Yeah, but... mine are really expensive."

Mabel rolls her eyes and walks further up the shore. "Climb up onto the bow here," she instructs me, and I do, then I accept her proffered hand and she helps me down onto the sand.

She wades back into the water and leans into the boat to grab her backpack and the shovels. She tosses one to me, but instead of catching it I flinch and step out of the way. Then she's charging up the beach like we're invading Normandy, dual-wielding shovel and crowbar, and I shake my head and follow along behind her. No turning back now.

I catch up to her at the edge of the woods, which may as well be the edge of the world without any light on it. Mabel drums her fingers on her phone and huffs. "I don't have any signal," she says. "Do you?"

I pull my phone from my pocket. "Nope."

"Dammit. I was going to use the GPS on my phone to guide us to the X on the map."

"Well, that's a shame. Back on the boat?" My feet have gone cold, staring into the blackness that is the woods. There could be anything in there. Probably trees and bushes, but still. There *could* be anything.

"Oh! I've got a bar," Mabel shouts, her voice echoing from a thousand directions at once. An owl hoots somewhere up ahead; *shut up, nobody cares!* "Okay, so we are... here," she says, showing me the map on her phone. "And we need to get to here. So we need to go... that way."

She could be right, she could be wrong, but it's not my job to decide. This is her treasure trail. I'm here to keep my brain occupied and to keep her from getting mauled by a bear. Mainly the first thing, though.

We set out into the woods, a flashlight each, and we don't walk very far at all before her phone's GPS claims that we're standing right over the X, but we soon figure out that it isn't entirely accurate, so we have to stand still in places and reload the map until we have a better idea of where we are. Ford's map isn't specific at all about what we're looking for, so we also decide that hiding whatever it is underground would have been cruel - every square foot of dirt and leaves is indistinguishable from the next. Instead we inspect the tree trunks. Ford liked hiding things in trees, Mabel says.

I give up on things really easily - it's the same reason I've relapsed so many times since joining AA - so about an hour in I'm growing flustered, and our whole plan feels futile. If I spin my flashlight around 360 degrees I'm going to see the same thing - tree, tree, tree. Another tree. And we haven't

been keeping track of the ones we've already checked.

I pull my sweater over my head and tie it around my waist, but it must have caught on my shirt, because Mabel says, "is that a belly-button piercing?"

"Uh, yeah," I say, my cheeks flaring up for no obvious reason.

"Can I see?"

Can she see my bare skin? I don't even consider it. The hem of my shirt just flies upwards, with my hands attached. I start to wonder how many things I've done for Mabel throughout my life simply because she's an attractive woman; if she wasn't an attractive woman, I'd be tucked up in bed right now.

Mabel shines her flashlight on my stomach, and I watch her fingers reach out and prod at the skin around the piercing, but all she's looking at is a tiny silver ball, so I'm not sure I understand her fascination. My brain can't decide whether I want to slap her hand away or pull her closer. I do neither.

"So cool," she breathes, like I'm showing her the moon through a telescope. She backs away and I start breathing again.

"It's just a stud," I tell her.

"I want to get one either side of my nose, here and here. Maybe one in my tongue, too. But my mom won't let me."

"Your mom won't- what? You're twenty years old."

"Yeah, but she has really strong opinions about that kind of thing. Tattoos and piercings. She says people should 'preserve their bodies.'"

"Wow."

"You should have seen her when Dipper brought his girlfriend round for dinner. She has a sleeve tattoo and Mom saw it poking out of her sweater. My dad thought it was cool, because he's a reasonable man, so we were all sat around studying this girl's tattoo while my mom was at the end of the table slowly sipping her wine. Ridiculous."

"Dipper has a girlfriend?"

"Yeah. Her name's Marie. They've been together for about a year now."

I smirk. "Red hair?"

"No," Mabel laughs. "Black hair. I think his preference for redheads was a phase."

We walk side by side, going nowhere, now, hoping we'll miraculously stumble upon anything significant. I frown at the ground and say, "you said Dipper was here, in Gravity Falls, back at Christmas. He was here doing... this, right? Following Ford's trail."

"Mhmm. He had a different set of clues, but yeah."

"He never got in touch with me and Wendy."

"Yeah," Mabel sighs. "I think he wanted to. But around the time that Ford died... well, Dipper has

these sort of... episodes. He can get in his own head a lot. Gets stressed very easily. He has told me next to nothing about the weeks he spent up here in winter break, but I can imagine that he wanted to spend every minute of it on Ford, and he saw anything else as a distraction from what mattered the most to him. I bet he would have loved to see you, otherwise. But even I can't talk to him when he's like that - he gets very abrupt and shoos me away. Then he forgets what he said the next day."

"Oh," I say, almost inaudibly. Back when we were friends, I knew Dipper, and I didn't know him at all. I feel guilty now. I was so obsessed with his sister that I rarely stopped to ask how he was doing.

"It's a twin thing. I go through phases of telling myself everything's happy and wonderful even when it isn't, and he goes through phases of telling himself that everything's awful and the world is against him, even when he's doing just fine." Mabel exhales and plops herself down on a tree stump. "We're never going to find this X, are we?"

I shake my head. "Maybe not in the dark. We could come back tomorrow. I'm not doing anything."

She smiles up at me. "That'd be great."

I invite her to sleep in my apartment. Don't ask me how that happened.

Okay, it happened like this: She pulled up outside my apartment, yawned, and I blurted out, "you could stay here if you like. I mean, because it's late." I pointed at the clock on the dashboard, in case I needed proof. 1:14 A.M. "We could go out on the lake again first thing in the morning."

Her face lit up, and now I'm rifling through my closet for that spare set of sheets I could have sworn I own. Aha - they're right at the bottom, underneath several shoe boxes. They've got an obnoxiously bright pink floral pattern on them that I thought was a good idea when I first moved away from home. And when I pick them up, a bottle of red wine rolls out and *clunks* on the carpet. My heart thumps. Holy shit. A hiding place that Nina didn't find and that I forgot about. I drop the sheets and pick up the bottle - full, unopened. I stand in place for a full minute and weigh up my options - I could take it to the kitchen and dispose of it right away, but that would warrant an explanation for the girl sitting on my couch. Or... there is no other option. I can't leave it in here. It's got danger written all over it. (Not literally - literally, it has Merlot written all over it.)

I set the bottle down in the bottom of the closet, promising out loud that I'll be back to deal with it later. I carry my garish pink sheets through to the living room, and when I hand them to Mabel she says, without a trace of irony, "ooh, those are nice."

"I was thinking - you could sleep in Nina's old room. There's a proper bed in there. You can use the couch cushions for a pillow."

"Sure, if that's okay with you."

I wander over to the closed door and my hand lingers on the handle for a moment, like if I open it my emotional floodgates will burst. I don't know how long I planned on cordoning off this part of the apartment - forever? This is Nina's space. She never liked me disturbing her space. I open the door and in my mind she's there, hunched over her little desk in the corner, and I'm trying to creep up behind her to peek at what she's writing. In reality, the room is empty and lifeless.

She's not dead, I tell myself. Stop trying to make misery out of nothing.

"How long did she live here?" Mabel asks, setting the sheets down on the bed.

"Couple of years," I say, my voice miles away. "Um. Bathroom is just outside on the right, there's a spare toothbrush in the cup by the sink - the red one." *The one crawling with germs from the last three women I slept with.* "And help yourself to water out of the fridge."

When I'm in my own bed, with the lights out, I come to realize that it doesn't matter who is on the other side of the paper-thin wall bordering the bedrooms. Just hearing somebody stirring, clearing their throat, plugging their phone into the wall outlet; the sliver of light under my door when somebody is in the kitchen, all of that is enough. It makes me feel protected, chips away at my loneliness.

I wait until the apartment is silent, then I sneak into the kitchen in the dark and pour thirteen dollars of wine into the sink.

I'll have to confront that loneliness eventually, and unless I convince Mabel to move in with me, I'll have to confront that loneliness tomorrow night. But for now, I can sleep, and I sleep soundly.

And I awake to a deep male voice, coming from my living room. I sit up in bed and hug the sheets to my chest; I sleep braless during the warmer months and if a man has broken into my apartment, the flimsy wooden door separating him and my breasts isn't going to protect them much.

But then I hear Mabel's gentle voice, and it takes me a second to fight through morning haze and recall that she slept here overnight. From there I determine that the man talking back to her is Jason. Except now they're not talking, they're yelling, and I'm usually grumpy in the morning *without* a domestic dispute pounding in my eardrums, so I throw on some clothes and get ready to intervene.

Their eyes are wide when I step out of my bedroom, as if they both forgot entirely that they were in somebody else's home.

"I'm sorry, Pacifica, I didn't want him to come in but he pushed past me," Mabel says.

"That's a woman," Jason says, incredulous. "You didn't tell me it was a woman."

"I told you this is my *friend's* apartment. What did you think I was doing?"

"I don't know, you stay out until 10 A.M. without texting me, what the hell am I supposed to think?"

"You probably shouldn't jump straight to 'she must be sleeping around.' How low do you think I am?"

My eyes widen on their own accord. There are layers to that question. First, that it would be "low" to sleep with me, and, oh yeah, she *has* slept with me before, while she was with Jason.

"Whatever," Jason says, flinging his hands up in the air, almost knocking over my lamp. "I'm sorry, Pacifica," he adds over his shoulder as he opens the front door, "but sometimes my girlfriend is out of line."

"I'm your *fiancée*! And *I'm* out of line?" she yells, but the door slams shut and I'm left with a ringing in my ears.

"Good morning," I say, my voice hoarse from sleep.

"I'm so sorry. That was so embarrassing. I told him we'd talk later but he barged inside, I didn't-

"It's fine." I yawn and traipse to the kitchen counter. "Still drink coffee?"

"Yeah. Please." She stands in the corner of my living room, same shirt and pants as yesterday, her hair hanging low and frizzy, eyes cast down like a kid on the naughty step.

"I'm not mad at you," I tell her. "Really."

She comes up to the counter and sits on one of the high stools.

"You didn't tell him you were staying here?"

"He goes out with his friends and doesn't come home until morning." She shrugs. "I wanted him to know how it feels. I didn't expect him to go on a psycho rampage looking for my car."

I nod. I'm no expert on relationships, in case you haven't picked up on that yet, so I know better than to offer her hollow advice. I also know firsthand how much it hurts to receive radio silence from Mabel, but hopefully this is the last time I ever empathize with her horrible fiancé.

We eat breakfast in silence - two bowls of the least flavorsome corn-based cereal on the market, to keep my weight in check - and take turns in the shower. Then on our way back to the lake, I explain to Mabel my plan for how we'll find her uncle's treasure, or whatever the fuck we're looking for, but I don't think she fully understands it, so I decide I'll explain it as we go along.

The lake is, as expected, much busier during the daytime. We have to park along the road because the parking lot is full, and we walk along the beach to the docks with our shovels and our backpacks, while kids paddle in the water and build shoddy sandcastles. The sun's on full-power, so I rub in sunscreen as we go along and then pass it to Mabel.

Right at the end of the dock, I hop into Soos' speedboat, with confidence this time. A rather elderly gentleman in the neighboring wooden dinghy is blatantly staring at us while we board. He has a scraggly gray-brown beard, wrinkly elbows, and a bright red nose; a brown flat cap and an olive green fisherman's jacket with his hands stuffed in the pockets.

"Morning Mabel," he says in a gruff but oddly cheerful voice, and I frown up at the girl untying the boat.

"Morning Joe," she sings.

"Spot of fishing today?"

"Not today, no. Heading out to Scuttlebutt Island for a picnic."

"Supposed to rain this afternoon. Be careful out there."

"We will."

"I could come with ya, if you like. Steer the boat, keep ya both warm."

"We're good, thanks Joe."

Once the engine is started and we're twenty feet from the dock, Mabel turns to me and says, "Joe's nice, if you look past the fact that he's a huge pervert."

I grin. "Imagine if Jason found you in *his* apartment."

For a second Mabel says nothing and I think I've crossed a line, but then she turns around and I see that she's keeling over in laughter. "Don't say things like that," she says, clutching her stomach and dropping into the seat next to me. It only takes her a few seconds to forget the joke, and her face falls serious. She gazes out over the stern of the boat, at the waves we're making. "What am I going to do about him? I never know what to say to make things better."

"Well, I think he's a dick. I'd break up with him."

"You'd say that if I was dating Gandhi. You have a bias against men."

"That's not true," I say, though I don't mean it to sound so defensive. "I know plenty of... decent men."

"Like who?"

"Your brother, for one."

"Would you date him if you were straight?"

"Yeah," I say. "I think I would. Not sure I'm his type, though."

"Because you're not Wendy?"

"Exactly."

She grins and goes silent for a moment. "Do you have a girlfriend? Can't believe I haven't asked you that yet."

"Nope. No, my love life is pretty... non-existent right now." My mind flashes back to Zoey, in the purple blouse. Possibly the most I've felt for one girl in one night, ever. *And it's all your fault*, I think, looking in Mabel's eyes.

"Well, don't get engaged, is all I'll say. It's overrated." She sighs. "That's mean, I didn't mean that. Jason is the sweetest guy in the world when we're not fighting. But he does such stupid things, and I... I say a lot of stupid things, so we fight a lot. That might be why you haven't seen the good side of us, yet."

Our stupidly complicated history embedded in the back of my mind tells me not to get mixed up in her relationship problems, so I keep quiet. I managed to stay out of them when they were forced upon my living room, so, I think I'm okay.

The plan I came up with over breakfast was to walk the length of the island, one end to the other, and count how many steps it takes us, and then do the same for the width. We can then measure the island on her picture of the map, and with some simple arithmetic, calculate how many steps we would need to take from one end of the island to reach the X on her map. I convey this to Mabel again before we enter the woods, and again, she looks at me like I'm talking in Morse code, but she's happy to go along with it anyway.

So we walk the island in silence; I'm very clear that Mabel shouldn't talk or do anything to distract me from counting in my head, but she still somehow forgets and attempts to start a conversation twice, cutting herself off with a hushed, *"oops, sorry."* The crickets are loud and the air is so humid that I feel like a jungle explorer, wading through bushes and ferns and... god, I'm sweating a lot. Or maybe we're pirates, on the hunt for buried treasure. I smile at the thought. It's so innocent. Like we're kids again. Like starting over.

From east to west, the island is 371 steps wide. From north to south, the island is 715 steps long. On the southern point, while Mabel befriends a crab, I whip out my ruler and begin to measure the island on the map.

Crazy how she trusted me with her unlocked phone. I glance up at her, crouching down beside the water, poking something with a stick. I could do all kinds of diabolical shit. Delete her Facebook. I could read her messages to Jason, or compose one of my own. *I've been meaning to tell you something. That girl you saw this morning? The one I work with at the diner? I slept with her once. While we were together.*

I don't do any of that, of course. But the bitter part of me likes that I could.

"Four-hundred and twenty-six steps north, Mabel," I call out to her. "And one-hundred and eighty-eight steps from east to west."

She strides over to me and wipes her sandy hands on her shorts. "And then we'll find it?"

"If the map was drawn super-accurately, and if you've re-drawn it properly, sure. At the least, we'll have a better idea of where to look."

"Are you sure *you* weren't related to Ford in some way?"

I shrug. "Maybe. My mom was a bit of a slut back in her heyday."

The X - and get ready, because this is a little anticlimactic - turns out to be right on top of the tree stump that Mabel sat on last night, just as we gave up searching. It's hard to recognize it, now in the full light of day, but I think Mabel does too, because I hear her say, "ah, shit," right beside me. The stump has a rectangular groove in it, a bit like a pizza paddle, and a handle with a finger-sized hole in which Mabel uses to lift the wooden cover. I flinch, like I'm expecting a poison dart to rocket out and strike her between the eyes. Too many movies.

Mabel pulls a single sheet of paper out of the tree stump. I bend over the stump to get a better look at the hollowed-out compartment, and that is all there was, a single, pristine piece of paper with what I assume is her uncle's handwriting. The compartment itself is perfectly rectangular and cut immaculately - I'm not sure exactly how he did it. I remember always hearing tools whirring away in the basement of the Shack and decide that Ford was something of a woodworker.

"It's a letter," Mabel breathes, holding the paper to her chest and looking in my eyes. "Oh gosh. I don't know if I'm ready for a letter."

I rock on the balls of my feet, staring right back at her, until I know from the fear in her eyes that we could stand here for hours and she would never read it herself. "Want me to read it?"

She nods frantically and passes the paper to me.

I clear my throat. "*Dear shithead-*"

She slaps my arm and I stifle a cackle.

"Mabel..."

"You know me. I'm not a man of material possessions. Before I die, I'm taking the time to emerge from my solitude and walk the backroads of Gravity Falls, retracing my family's memories, including yours. Memories, I believe, possess far more value than any material object. I hope you agree. If you're reading this, that means you have decided to join me. And if you've made it this

far, you will have already ventured further than anybody could expect of the average human being. I know you will, because you twins have always been extraordinary.

"Continue to follow my trail, and at its end, I'll share with you a memory of my own. I apologize in advance for the puzzles, Mabel, I understand that you've never been a fan. But what fun would it be if I merely pointed you in the right direction?"

"You once sat cross-legged on the floor of the basement and regaled me with the legend of the Gobblewonker, and if I remember correctly, it all began here, on Scuttlebutt Island. A preposterous name for a plot of land, by the way - are you to tell me that the man to discover these woods was called Scuttlebutt? How unfortunate. You told me that you and Dipper entered a photography contest, to snap the supernatural? You took a remarkable photo of this creature - you described it to resemble the Loch Ness monster - but you misplaced the camera and the photo was never seen again.

"I found that rather amusing. You kids caught me up on all the technology I've missed over the decades, and yet you carry around disposable cameras! You could have snapped your Gobblewonker on a cell phone and had it uploaded to the cloud within minutes, could you not?"

"I digress. I've just walked the perimeter of this island, twice, and have not been fortunate enough to see the beast myself. I'll just have to take your word for it, sweetheart.

"When you are ready to continue the trail, please turn this page over."

I go to do just that, admittedly gripped by the dead man's narrative myself, but Mabel says, "no. Not yet."

I look up at her and she's crying, smearing tears across her cheeks, staring at my feet.

"Sorry. I don't think I'm ready for more. Thank you. For reading that."

I fold the piece of paper and slip it into my pocket. The few caring instincts I possess urge for me to reach out and console her, but I don't. I let her take the moment into her own hands.

"God, I didn't think it would be that hard to listen to," she says, and sniffles loudly. "It's like... that's him, on that page. It's like listening to his self-written eulogy. We never had a funeral so my brain's never been dedicated to thinking about it until just now."

I nod, a soft spot somewhere within me severely wounded. "I can imagine."

The last of her tears dry up, and she flashes me one of those dazzling Mabel Pines smiles, the ones I always considered such a treat. "He was right here. On this same dirt. Not even that long ago."

Can't take my eyes off of her, which is worrying. But I don't think I'd be able to tear my eyes away from anyone in her position. It's such an intimate moment to be witnessing - grief and joy and nostalgia, bundled into one fragile smile. I feel kind of special to be a part of it.

She meets my eyes, her lips go straight, and she tells me earnestly that she's so glad she came back.

"I'm glad you came back too," I say, and then she reaches in to hug me, in the eighty-degree heat, well beyond the limits of a town that lies in the middle of nowhere. And it isn't like our awkward *hello* hug at that party a few weeks back, this is more like a *where have you been for the last four years* kind of hug. And I tell myself that we must still be friends, we must have always been friends, even after everything that happened, because why else would we be out here, by ourselves, so far from humanity?

Mabel pulls back, wipes a fresh tear from her eyes, and stands up straight, a new air of determination about her. She holds out her hand. "Can I read the next part?"

Without a word I pull the paper from my pocket and press it into her palm. She unfolds it, and parts her lips, then shuts her mouth, repeat, repeat, until I'm sure she's going to break down in tears again. But then she finds her voice, surprisingly steady:

"For this next one, you're going to have to take a page out of my brother's book. We're breaking in."

Twelve

In the fall that I was seventeen, I came out of the closet.

Or, I was beaten to a pulp and dragged out of the closet. I never explicitly walked up to somebody and said, "I'm gay." It was a secret one day, and common knowledge the next.

Although my once-esteemed family was no longer rich, we hadn't quite escaped the town's blinding spotlight. A lot of people reveled in our downfall; bankruptcy and divorce, the Northwests weren't so invincible after all! And now, a gay daughter to put an end to the bloodline. Once an heiress to fortune and fame, I was now dubbed as the 'girl who lost it all.'

Fitting title, really, considering that every time I caught a glimpse of my scabbed knuckles I was transported back to the road outside the Mystery Shack, and I saw my soulmate exiting my life all over again.

That afternoon after Mabel left, Wendy found me sitting on a bench on Main Street. I hadn't gone home, because all of my bags were back at the lake house. I had just wandered to the nearest place that wasn't as devoid of life as I felt. She picked me up in her van and she asked me a series of unimportant questions, to survey my sanity. She clearly knew, at that point, that Mabel and I had fallen out, but I didn't know if she had the full picture pieced together yet. Wendy is a kind and insightful girl, always has been, so she didn't ask me about Mabel. If I wanted to talk about it, I wouldn't have had such a glazed look on my face as I slowly chewed through the cheeseburger Wendy bought me in the drive-thru.

We spent a quiet night at the lake house - Wendy, Candy and I - and I pretended to be fast asleep on the couch when they headed up to bed, because I wouldn't have been able to sleep in the very spot in which I had desecrated my closest relationship.

I've never known who found out about that night first. It could have been Dipper, or Wendy, or Candy. Or Naomi or Elise. Or somebody else entirely. The story became less accurate with each ear that it reached, it seemed, and the student body of Gravity Falls High was under the impression that I had made out with a girl at a party and that she had told me she was straight, which was almost laughably watered down from the truth.

In early October, I was suspended from school for four days for making a girl's nose bleed.

You might remember my old friends Tiffany and Alina. I won't blame you if you don't - they were shallow girls, devoid of personality, and also the kind of people that constantly sought to trade up in social status. And, well, halfway through our junior year, they traded up. Tiffany started dating the football team's quarterback and they migrated to the cheerleading squad, and suddenly I was eating lunch by myself.

One morning, I was enjoying a quiet pee in one of the newly renovated bathroom stalls, minding my own business, and when I went to wash my hands I noticed Alina was checking herself out in the mirror at the next sink over.

"You're looking nice," I heard her say.

It's easy to let your guard down when you're desperate for an ally. "Thanks," I said. "So are you."

"Yeah?" She turned to face me, leaned against the sink. "Would you?" she asked, using both hands to gesture to her body as a whole. There was a smirk on her face - I was stupid not to recognize that

she was mocking me.

I shut off the faucet and looked over at her. I imagined my lips on the dark skin of her neck. I pictured my fingers raking through her thick black hair. I performed a quick mental x-ray through her t-shirt. "Yeah," I shrugged, turning back to the mirror.

Alina chuckled and said, "funny. I never pegged you as a dyke."

I saw the madness in my own eyes. They were the same blue eyes they had always been, but I was wearing that glazed look that Wendy had told me about. Like I was halfway through being possessed. "What did you just call me?" I said, a bitter taste on my tongue.

"A dyke," she repeated, punctuating the word for the benefit of my hearing.

Well, what were my options? I could have ignored it, took the high road, feigned indifference. I could have reported it to a teacher - our school was very protective of its LGBT students, more for the sake of political correctness than our comfort, but protective nonetheless. But consumed by rage, I was aware only of one option.

I walked up behind her. She thought I was leaving the bathroom. I took one last look at her self-congratulatory smirk in the mirror, then I grabbed a clump of her hair and slammed her face into the sink. She struggled, naturally, so I pressed her face to porcelain while I turned the hot water faucet and stared at my own maniacal reflection. Her face must have been covering the drain, because after a few seconds (a minute?) I felt the hot water reach my hand. I yanked it away and Alina threw her head back, frantically rubbing the water out of her eyes, and when she backed into the door of the stall I knew she would forever be terrified of me. I watched her take heavy breaths, a stream of blood from her nose seeping into her mouth, her wet hair stuck to her cheeks. She maintained eye contact for what felt like an eternity, then dashed out the door. I turned back to the sink, watched the last of the pink water swirl into the drain, and then I looked up and saw myself gulp. My fingers were twitching. It felt like my blood was burning me to a crisp from the inside out.

I don't know where Alina went for the rest of the day, or if anybody found her in such a state, but after sixth period I was called into the principal's office and issued a four-day holiday. I was told that my punishment could have been far more severe, like anger-management severe, if Alina hadn't come into his office earlier in the day and admitted that the attack had been provoked and even deserved. Whether she *had* done that, I didn't know. Like I said, the school was very protective of its LGBT students, perhaps to the point of corruption.

I spent the first day of my suspension on edge, confining myself to my room, worried that anything at all in the outside world could cause me to snap again. I didn't like feeling that I wasn't in control of my own body. Northwests fought their battles with verbal attacks, not physical. My mind settled into a pattern of playing the scene on repeat, and each time I came up with a response better than bashing Alina's brain into the sink.

I'd rather be a dyke than an ugly duckling.

And yet, boys will continue to pursue me and ignore you.

Hey, does it smell like vicious loser in here? Oh, wait, my bad. It's just you.

On the second day, I calmed down a bit.

On the third day, while scrolling through Mabel's Facebook feed, witnessing secondhand her life

rolling on as usual, I had a rare moment of clarity. I knew that I simply could not lie in bed and feel sorry for myself forever. I removed her from my friends list, blocked her, and then went into my phone and blocked her there too. It might not have mattered. She hadn't called yet and maybe she was never going to.

I got out of bed, I took off my clothes, I threw on some shorts and a plain white t-shirt, I raided my closet for an old pair of sneakers, and then I took off out the door. And I wasn't running after a girl anymore, I was running to forget her. I got to the bottom of the street and realized I had forgotten my headphones, music would have made this more momentous, but it didn't matter, I would play the music in my head. *Running on Empty*? Too cliché. *Run to the Hills*? Too hardcore. *Heart of Glass*? Nothing to do with running, but what a song. I played that.

I vaulted over a fallen tree. I stopped and petted a dog. I balanced on a log to cross a stream and it was so lame but I laughed, because I felt invincible, outside, always moving, never stopping to think, or dwell on anything.

I quit playing the piano. Everything I produced when I sat down at the keys was an ugly mess, fueled by anger, punctuated by laziness. I remember one night I was sat there, my hands in my lap, trying to charge my fingers with magic, and then an ungodly shriek from the back yard caused me to spin around, and my neighbor's cat was out there, murdering a crow. *That sounds better than my music*, I thought, and I closed the lid over the keys and stood up, so that the stool could begin to gather dust without me.

My dad finally moved out. I had no idea how Mom ended up entitled to the house - I hadn't followed the proceedings at all, and I didn't care. Dad got an apartment and an office job in a town called Roseburg, and sold his soul to the nine-to-five grind. Although the man had devoted little to no energy in his life to spending time with his daughter, all of a sudden he was texting me asking when I was next coming up to visit.

Who is this? I texted back.

It's your father.

I frowned at the phone. *Are you sure?*

We started to play golf together, every other weekend. His personality hadn't undergone some miraculous transformation, and I wasn't naive enough to think that it would. He would ask me about my life while he concentrated on putting, and then interrupt me at the first opportunity to relate whatever I had said to his own past. He used to lecture me about making sensible decisions, financially, even romantically, and I'd be tempted to swing my club back and whack him in the face because *hello? These are all the areas of life that you've failed at, buddy*. Still, I didn't mind. I welcomed every distraction, and despite being a teenage girl, I enjoyed golf. Scoring lower than him nine games out of ten was an unrivaled thrill. And above all, I looked cute in my little golfer's outfit. I had a pink cap with my ponytail threaded through the back, a white polo, and white shorts with purple stripes down the sides. I bought everything one size too small, because if there was a perfect place to whore myself out, it was a golf course crawling with old men.

Kidding, obviously. Something bizarre did happen, though.

My dad had a habit of visiting the pro shop in the club after every round, one-hundred percent certain that his clubs were the cause of his loss and that he needed an upgrade, and, in case you weren't yet convinced that he lived a life of delusion - I was using the same clubs as he was. Anyway, I would walk around the small shop, studying the overpriced inventory. The girl that always worked behind the counter I recognized from school. One day I looked up and caught her

eye, and she looked quickly away, down at the cash register. She had shoulder-length brown bangs, always topped with a white beanie, and thin pink lips.

The next time I was in there, I listened in on my dad arguing discreetly with the girl about the grooves in the head of his nine iron, and she was explaining apologetically that she wasn't a golf pro but she was pretty sure they were just made that way, and they shouldn't have affected his game in any noticeable way. When Dad was finished spewing his bullshit excuses for the day, I followed him out, mouthed "sorry" to the girl, and she grinned at me like I'd just asked for her hand in marriage.

Definitely gay, I thought to myself. I found her Facebook profile that night through the golf club's page. Her name was Katie. She was in her sophomore year. She had a little brother, three cats, and a parrot. And sprinkled among her liked pages were an assortment of LGBT-themed groups and chat rooms. Needless to say, this made me more than a little excited.

I scheduled a game with Dad for the next weekend. Katie smiled at me in the halls three times that week, but I never approached her because she was constantly flanked by other girls that I wouldn't have known how to deal with.

On Sunday I stood behind the shelf of golf balls, watching her deal with a customer out of the corner of my eye, waiting to pounce. My dad was in the bar, drinking away another embarrassing defeat. I don't know why he still bothered to show up.

Katie finished up with the customer and immediately turned and wandered through a door, and I thought, *fuck, she's gone forever*, but she re-appeared at the counter within seconds. She didn't see me walk up so I startled her when I said, "hey."

"Hey," she said, with a smile that told me she had never expected to hear a word from me, ever.

"I get sweaty hands," I said. (A fantastic opener.) "I find that it's hard to grip my clubs properly."

"Okay. Sounds like you could use some gloves?"

"That's what I was thinking. But there's one problem, I just don't know what color to get."

"What... color?"

"Yeah. I was hoping you could help me with the whole... color-to-sweat-reduction ratio."

"Okay," Katie said, beaming like a lightbulb had flickered on in her head. "If you'd like to follow me..." She led me around to the shelf near the front of the shop, with the gloves and the wristbands. "So we have the standard blacks and whites, and then we have... I don't know what color you'd call that. Tan? But right up here," she said, reaching for a pair, "hot pink. This is what you want if your hands are sweaty. I've heard that the vibrancy of the color seeps into your bloodstream and chills out your sweat glands."

"I've heard that too, actually."

"Plus, the more important thing - you look really cute in pink."

I think I blushed. I was supposed to be the one in control of this interaction. "I see," I said, a grin consuming my face. I took the gloves from her hand and our fingers brushed. "Pink it is."

When she rung me up at the counter, I said, "you've been a really big help, Katie."

Her smile fell apart and her eyes twinkled. "How do you know my name?"

I smirked. "You're wearing a name tag."

"Oh." She blushed and handed me a plastic bag containing the gloves I didn't need.

"Thanks," I said, and feeling confident, I winked before I turned to leave.

My intentions had been made perfectly clear - two weeks later she asked if I wanted to talk out back during her coffee break, and I followed her through the back of the shop, outside past a pair of dumpsters and into an array of parked golf carts. Katie told me she had something cool to show me, and she hijacked one of the carts and drove around the outskirts of the course until we came to a small lake on the edge of the grounds. The water was murky, and the sky was overcast, and Katie said, "cool, huh?"

"Not really," I answered, but the arm draped around the back of my seat told me that she hadn't brought me out here to stare at a lake, so I shifted closer to her and we made out for twenty minutes.

It meant everything to me, and it meant nothing to me. Katie kissed with an intensity I'd never known before. Every time we pulled apart she left my body buzzing, like I was recovering from a lightning bolt straight to my chest. I was glad to have come out to the world just for the sake of those moments, sometimes hidden in the trees behind the seventeenth hole, sometimes in the back room of the pro shop. I started hanging around at the golf club on the evenings that she worked, waiting for her to go on break, and she'd always greet me with a flirtatious smile and lead me by the hand to wherever we were due to explore one another's faces that night.

And although we liked each other, we never ventured further than that. We were honest from the get-go - I was desperately trying to get over the love of my life, and she was in love with a girl she had met online years before I arrived on the scene, a girl who was due to move to Oregon over the upcoming summer, and a girl that had already agreed to start a relationship with Katie the moment she first laid eyes on her.

Katie was a fun assistance in my overcoming my feelings for Mabel. She truly helped me through it. More than anything, it was nice to have somebody to talk to at school, someone to smile at me in the hallways and remind me it wasn't me versus the world.

And between Katie and golf and Wendy and running, for a while, everything was okay. Each day I came closer to knowing that my life didn't revolve around Mabel, and it never had.

That little lull in my life, in the spring that I turned eighteen - I know it now as the calm before the storm.

Thirteen

Chapter Notes

Thank you, as always, for your comments. I'm quite a deadpan guy but seeing your feedback pop up in my inbox makes me RADIATE WITH WARMTH. Well, it makes me smile, at least. That's enough.

Unfortunately I won't be able to post next Saturday – you can expect the next update on Tuesday the 31st of October (ooOOoooOh). It isn't a Halloween-themed chapter, though, which sucks.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy this episode of "Gravity Falls But In Text Form And It Has Lesbians In It", which is what I'm thinking of renaming the story to. Let me know if you prefer that over the current title.

You know, I used to like Hall & Oates. But there's something about hearing *You Make My Dreams* for the fifty-seventh time in about two weeks that really grinds my gears, and then tears out my gears and stomps all over them with an iron-plated boot.

The iconic drumbeat kicks in and Mabel slides across the squeaky-clean floor of the empty diner.

What I want, you've got and it might be hard to handle.

She points over the counter at me, past the glass I'm polishing, swaying from side to side, and then without warning my eardrums she wails, *"the candle feeds the flame!"*

"Turn it off," I tell her.

I think she was about to say "make me," but both of our heads turn to the door of the back office as Lindsay emerges, snapping her fingers and stepping towards us to the beat of the music.

"Haven't heard this one in a while," she calls out, and if I could scream at my boss I would, because Lindsay doesn't have a sarcastic bone in her body, and I don't know how she has missed this song playing itself on repeat on her own jukebox for the last however-many years.

So this is my Monday night now, apparently. Watching my boss and my (insert degree of relationship to Mabel here) belt out a duet that literally forces my face to contort in embarrassment for them.

"Come on, Pacifica," Lindsay says. "You have permission to let loose and dance for a while."

"And it's ten o'clock," I say, walking to the coat rack to grab my hoodie. "So I have written permission to abandon this train wreck. Are you coming, Mabel, or am I doing this on my own?"

Mabel scurries over to the jukebox and switches off the music.

"Now what are you two up to?" Lindsay asks, folding her arms and assuming her motherly mode.

"Treasure hunt," Mabel says excitedly.

"More like... dredging up an old man's memories," I add.

"Again?" Lindsay says. "How long is your treasure hunt supposed to take?"

We shrug in unison.

"Alright, well, you girls have fun. Don't stay out too late."

"I'm not sure 'fun' is the right word," I mumble, and Mabel pushes me out the door, bobbing up and down with impatience.

The mansion I used to live in sits on a tall hill overlooking the town. Though mostly obscured by the forest, the very tip of the roof is visible from the door of the diner - during the day, at least. I *could* explain why we're headed there now, but it's easier if I show you the second half of Ford's letter that Mabel read out to me on Scuttlebutt Island:

For this next one, you're going to have to take a page out of my brother's book. We're breaking in.

Mabel, it is a true testament to your character that you were once able to expose a very powerful, elitist married couple as categorical liars, undermine their notoriety, and then not a year later, befriend their daughter. You possess the useful superpower of making everybody fall in love with you. Perhaps I can put you in contact with the Grim Reaper? Sit down with him, have some tea. Within the hour you could convince him to spare me.

I'm writing this from what I presume was once the Northwest family's living room. Or, one of many living rooms. I'm rather proud of what I've created here. I think you'll enjoy it, if you can bear the trek up here to the manor. I have to cross my fingers that, by the time you're reading this, the building is not better secured against trespassers, or worse, under new ownership. I'd like to see a realtor explain what I've built here to prospective buyers.

It dawns on me now that during our phone conversations over the years, you haven't once mentioned Pacifica. I do hope the two of you remained in touch. I don't know, my memory could well be failing me. I might even be in the wrong house!

Until next time,

Ford

It was strange, hearing Ford mention me. I had seen him around town since the summer that Mabel left for good, and I had always sunk into a trance at the sight of him, my heartbeat picking up as I waited for one of the twins to appear at his side, but they never did. And Ford never looked my way. It had been easy to think that the man had forgotten about my existence.

To be honest, I'm glad that this third step in Mabel's quest at least somewhat involves me. As much as I love sticking my nose in other people's business, tagging along with a girl while she discovers her dead uncle's trail of letters is far from my more conventional pastimes. I don't think I would have come with her if the destination wasn't my old doorstep.

I can see the mansion fully, now. Mabel and I have just emerged from the woods bordering the hill, and now we have to walk the winding trail from here to the back yard that zig-zags up the hill, dotted with pine trees, the hill itself being too steep to climb. We decided earlier, over coffee in the diner, that this was a stealthier plan than walking up the road around the front, which was once rigged with security cameras that may still be monitored from somewhere.

I stop at the beginning of the serpentine trail and look up. The sky is cloudless and the moon paints

our route up the hill with dim light. The manor itself looms over us menacingly, the once constant yellow glow from its windows a thing of the past. A few steps ahead, I sense Mabel pause and turn to look at me.

"You okay?" she says, her voice soft against the backdrop of the breeze and the occasional cricket.

"My dad used this trail to get down to the woods when he went hunting," I tell her, disjointed memories flashing through my head that I want to vomit out in words. "He took me with him once. I shot a fox. I hated it."

"You've told me that before," Mabel says, now at my side. "You said it looked at you right before you pulled the trigger. Before you had time to react. And you couldn't forget its eyes."

"Yeah." And my dad patted me on the shoulder and said *nice shot, Pacifica*. I frown. "Come on. Let's see what other awful memories we can bring back to life."

We don't say anything else until we're halfway up the hill. I can clearly see the iron gate in the stone wall that surrounds the house from here. It's possible to climb over it - I've done it before - but I can't imagine that would have been Ford's method of entry.

"It's cold out here tonight," Mabel says, cutting through my train of thought.

I glance over at her, in her Greasy's blue shirt and gray skirt, her bare arms folded. "You should have brought a jacket."

"It was so warm earlier. Didn't think I'd need one."

"Well then, you're stupid. Not my problem."

"I'm stupid because I can't predict the weather?"

"Among other reasons."

"If you were polite," she says, "you would offer me your hoodie."

"Then I would be cold," I deadpan.

Mabel smirks and bumps her shoulder into mine. "I was only teasing."

I'm really not sure what compels me to do it, for old time's sake, maybe, but I wrap my arm around her shoulders and say, "here. Better?"

For a second she looks up at me like I've terrified her, but then a broad smile takes over her face and, shit, that's the kind of smile that girls give me when they're inviting me to kiss them. I almost laugh at the thought, which plants a smile on my face, too, and Mabel puts her arms around my midriff and we walk the rest of the trail wrapped up together, sharing body warmth. All I can smell is her perfume, which is incredible considering she has been serving deep-fried heart attacks on a plate for the last seven hours. I don't think I've ever been lucky enough to smell so great even after being in the diner for five minutes. I'll have to ask her what her secret is, one day. Not right now. Pointing out how delightful she smells right now would take me one step closer to flirting. That is, if I'm not there already. Am I there already? I glance at the hand resting on her opposite arm. Fuck.

We separate naturally at the tall iron gate. After a moment of pointless deliberation, I step forward and rattle the gate, but as I imagined, it is locked.

"This is creepy," Mabel says, her arms hugging her chest again.

"If you think it's creepy for you, imagine how I feel." I look up at the conical spikes lining the top of the gate and sigh. "Should have changed out of these freaking heels." I kick off my shoes and post them through the slits in the gate. There are two horizontal bars in the gate, evenly spaced, so I plant one bare foot on the lower bar, push my other foot to the second bar, and then boost myself over the top of the gate, carefully, so my clothes don't catch on the spikes. Mabel takes off her heels and follows suit.

The mansion lacks a back yard entirely - there's a ten-foot wide gap between the stone wall and the house, a gravel path running along it, lined with flowerbeds on either side. The flowers are dead, and the lamps jutting out of the ground are all switched off. Mabel follows me through the dark, around to the side-entrance of the building. My heart races when I see that one half of the wooden double doors is ajar. It hadn't occurred to me that a secluded mansion might be a squatter's paradise.

"Well," Mabel says, stepping past me. "If the door's open, we're not breaking in, right?" She turns on the flashlight on her phone and pushes the door open, stepping back while it creaks loudly. I peer over her shoulder as she casts a beam of light into my old kitchen. She calls out "hello?" once in the kitchen, then again when we walk out into the hallway that connects to the main lobby, and the only voice that comes back is her own, reverberant.

The walls are still adorned with hunting trophies - deer heads, mostly. My dad never took them down because they wouldn't have all fit in our new house. And my mom hated them.

"This is way creepier than I thought it was going to be," I say, while Mabel steams fearlessly ahead into the lobby. I peer into one of the old studies, and very dimly lit by the moon, I can see a felted chair and a dark curved desk. That's all that's in the room. And then I remember sitting at that desk, as a child, absorbed in one of my *Where's Waldo?* books, the smell of dinner drifting in from the kitchen. Why is it so easy to feel nostalgic for memories you wish you hadn't lived through in the first place?

Something crawls up the back of my neck and I yelp like a wounded dog. I spin around and Mabel's there, of course, poorly suppressing a grin.

"Well that isn't funny at all," I tell her, pinching at her ribs until she swipes my hand away.

We climb up the grand staircase in the lobby and my legs carry me to the door of my old bedroom. It takes my brain a while to instruct my hand to turn the doorknob, and when the door swings open a gust of cold air blasts us in the face. There always was a draft in here. I hear Mabel follow me into the room but I don't say anything for a minute; I turn on the spot slowly in the center of the room, like one of those display tables on the shopping network, and I mentally piece together everything that made up the room.

"I learned to play piano in here," I murmur without really thinking about it.

Mabel steps up close to me and says, "do you still play?"

"No."

"How come?"

I shrug. "Grew out of it."

"You should grow back into it. You were incredible."

"I wasn't *that* good."

"You were. I remember coming to see you at the bar, you literally glowed when you were on stage. And when you started singing, oh my god. It was beautiful."

"I've just... lost all interest. There's this moron at the diner who plays the same Hall & Oates song on the jukebox twenty-four seven. It's really ruined music for me."

Mabel prods my chest and says, "you *will* dance with me by the end of summer."

"I will not."

"You will," she says, moving to the door and leaning on the frame. "I have my ways." She either winks at me or blinks - it's hard to tell in the dark, but it makes me blush anyway, because apparently my body will settle for any amount of attention from any woman whatsoever.

We find the 'creation' that Ford was talking about on the second floor, in what I once knew as the upstairs lounge. Mabel waltzes into the room without any light and trips over it. I grab her arm and steady her before she slams into the floor, and when I shine my flashlight at her feet we both gasp quietly, a long-lost part of our childhood personalities coming back to life.

There's green felt, bordered either side by wooden planks. It's a miniature golf course. A miniature miniature golf course, five holes in the room in total.

Mabel laughs to herself. "*This* is cool."

The felt ramps up and down in places, and more wooden planks and sawed-up logs act as obstacles. There's even a red metal loop on the fifth hole, which looks like it's merely been stolen from an existing putt-putt golf course. Ford was an imaginative felon in his final days, it would seem.

"Check this out," Mabel says from behind me, and when I shine my light on her she's holding up two clubs and two balls. I notice an electric lantern on the shelf behind her, clearly left here for us along with the clubs, and when I switch it on it's far brighter than I expected, casting the whole room in an orange glow. I plant it on the floor in the center.

"Did Ford know I would be here with you?" I say, my eyebrows knitted together.

Mabel glances between me and the clubs, and then her eyes go wide when I reiterate that she's holding two of them. "Maybe," she says. "That'd be weird."

"Well then, Pines." I strut over to her and take one of the putters. "Ready to embarrass yourself?"

She smiles at me coyly and says, "there's only one girl here who's going to embarrass herself, and it isn't you."

"What?"

"I mean it isn't me. It *is* you. Darn it! I messed that up."

I watch Mabel drop her ball on the felt for the first hole, and proceed to stretch her limbs in several totally unnecessary ways like she's on a starting block at the Olympics. I roll my eyes and lean back on the empty bookshelf behind me, then stand up straight for fear of it collapsing and taking me down with it. When her warm-up ritual is over, Mabel taps the ball effortlessly and it sails forward into the hole.

"That's how it's done," she says, sauntering over to take my place by the bookshelf.

"Please. It's a straight line to the hole, a blind man could make that shot."

"It's a good thing you have the skill level of a blind man, then."

While I'm lining up my shot, I make the mistake of glancing over at her. She's sitting on the bookshelf, one smooth, bare leg folded over the other, her high-heeled foot twirling in circles, her hair hanging low, her body aglow in orange light. I wonder to myself if she ever realizes how alluring she can be, then curse at myself, and despite the ongoing hormonal battle in my mind, I score a hole-in-one just as Mabel did.

We each take two shots on the second hole, she takes four shots to my two on the third hole, I take three shots to her one on the fourth hole, and now she has scored a hole-in-one on the final hole, and I'm waiting for her to finish making a monumentally big deal over it through song and dance.

If I can make this in one shot, it will be a tie. If I don't, I'll curl up in a ball and flood the house with my tears. I'm professionally trained in mini golf, for god's sake. Mabel is crouched down at the end of the felt, like she's guarding the hole, so her smug face is all I can see while I'm lining up my shot. I have to aim dead straight, with enough power to make it through the loop.

"Can you move?" I say, trying to sound stern but only managing more of a giggly teenager.

"I'm not doing anything!"

"Just you being there is annoying. It's distracting me."

"There are no rules about me sitting here, Pacifica."

"You'd just better hope you don't get a golf ball to the teeth."

I miss. I'm too far to the left and the ball bounces off the metal rim of the loop, with a *ding* so loud that it's almost like the course itself is laughing at me, and not just Mabel, who is now up on her feet and lifting her club as her trophy.

"God dammit," I shout, throwing my club at the floor, no longer concerned about the flimsy foundations of the room.

"They said she couldn't do it," Mabel announces to the room. "They said she couldn't beat the prissy Pacifica Northwest, but she has done it, and with grace!"

"Grace? Is that what you call this?" I say, advancing on her, while hopelessly unable to suppress my laughter. "Is that what you call taunting me from behind the hole?"

"There is *nothing* against the rules about standing behind the hole, my friend."

"Oh, it's not against the rules? Is it against the rules if I throw you down the stairs?" Mabel's a petite woman, but it's still surprising how easy it is to pick her up and sling her over my shoulder.

"What are you *doing*?" she squeals, through her own giggling. "Put me down!"

"Nope, you're going on a trip. To the floor."

"Pacifica, put me down," she says, laughter betraying her, while she hammers on my butt with her golf club. I make it halfway across the landing to the stairs, and it's only when she lands a particularly tough blow that I let her down.

"Ow. I think you just bruised my butt cheek."

"Serves you right," she says, shoving my chest.

"God, you're heavy. You should eat less."

Mabel smirks and folds her arms. "Maybe *you* should be less aggressive with your flirting."

"*Flirting?* Trust me, sweetie, I would never flirt with the likes of you."

Only when I turn back and walk toward the golf-course-slash-lounge do I let the smile slide off of my face. I'm not flirting with her, am I? I would be *stupid* to flirt with her, knowing what I know about her. And about us. Anyway, she started it. I think? It's suddenly very uncomfortable to look at her. The thought of it all happening over again, falling head over heels, that's much scarier than the thought of murderers lurking in the shadows of my old house.

While I lay my club and ball on the bookshelf we found them on, which feels somewhat pointless, I hear Mabel let out a soft "oh" from behind me. I turn around and she's unfolding a piece of paper - it must have been hidden inside the final hole. I keep my distance as she reads aloud, "*You'll find me in the theater, right beneath your socks.*" Her eyebrows knit together and she turns the paper over, then turns it back around. "That's all it says. Is there a theater in here?"

I shake my head. "There's a theater on the other side of town. It's near Yumberjacks."

"Right beneath your socks..."

"Maybe under the floorboards?"

Mabel stands there in thought for a moment, and with the adrenaline of competition and my supposed flirting having worn off, my body remembers that we're approaching midnight, and I yawn. She looks up at me. "When are you next free?"

I shrug. It's always humiliating admitting out loud that my evening plans consist of nothing at all. "Tomorrow."

Tomorrow night, we agree, we will scope out the theater for a possible entry point, like the true criminals we have become. The alternative to breaking in would be to actually watch a play, and I've seen the Gravity Falls amateur theatrics ensemble once in my life, and once is enough.

We leave Ford's golf course how we found it, which I'm sure will be an irritating surprise for whoever the mansion's next owners turn out to be. Maybe it will never be lived in again, maybe I'll walk by one day and a demolitions crew will be up on the hill, knocking it to the ground. I don't think I'll miss it.

Mabel and I hop over the back gate and start walking down the hill. I'm lost in thought when she wraps her hands around my arm and falls into step beside me, my nose welcoming the scent of her perfume again. She smiles, almost shyly, and tells me that it's still cold. And although a week ago I would have shaken her off, I seem to have accepted this new reality where we can cuddle up to each other like we're best friends again.

But these sweet, innocent moments between us can never last. We're about halfway down the hill when Mabel cuts into the night's silence with, "would now be a good time to talk?"

My throat constricts. "About?"

She takes a breath and then talks fast, like the words will make her queasy. "About what I did to you."

They certainly make me sick. "I already told you I don't want to talk about that."

Mabel stops walking while I carry on. Our arms separate naturally. "That was weeks ago. That was before... tonight."

I halt and turn to look back at her, barely able to make out her features in the dark. "And what do you think happened tonight?"

"It was like we stepped back in time. Like the last few years didn't matter. They do matter, of course, that's not what I mean... but tonight felt like we were friends again."

She says the last part wistfully, like she expects me to feel sorry for her. I feel my face harden. Suddenly I'm not looking at the Mabel that I hugged on the beach, or the Mabel that I invited into my apartment, or the Mabel that I wrapped up in my arms on our way up this hill. Now she's the one that drove away, the one that made me feel sick to my stomach with shame and regret and dread for months, the one who had a boyfriend, the one who now has a fiancé. "It did," I admit. "And of course you can't let that happen on its own, can you? You can't just... let something be. You won't rest until everything is one-hundred percent perfect between us."

"That's not true," she pleads. "I just want a chance to apologize, to explain-"

"I know that's what you want," I snap. I hear the echo flurry through the woods at the base of the hill. "Why should I give you that chance? I know what you want. You want closure. You want to come up here and stroll back into my life, make amends, and then fuck off back home with your head held high because you're no longer hated by some girl from your past who lives hundreds of miles away. *Fuck* that." My vision turns blurry from an onslaught of tears, reliving all the moments after she left that I *needed* her and she wasn't there. "I want you to *remember* what you did to me. I want the image of me in your rear-view mirror pounding the road with my fist, I want that burned into your eyelids, so that every time you try to sleep you relive it all over again."

"I already do," she says, taking two steps toward me while I step backwards. Tears stream from her eyes. "I think about it all the time. If you would just listen, I want to make amends for *you*, not for me."

"Well you can't," I tell her, blinking away my own tears. "You can't make up for it, ever. I cried over you for *weeks*, Mabel. I spent days, in bed, thinking about you, in *agony*, because you were never coming back. If you had stayed in my life, I-" what? Wouldn't have started drinking? I couldn't know that. "You can't make up for that."

She stares at her feet and grinds her heel into the dirt, her mouth twisting like there are a thousand things she can't decide whether to say.

I wipe the tears from my eyes and say, "We should have known this would happen. Working at the diner together, going out on these weird, emotional adventures. It's too much."

"I'll quit my job at the diner," she murmurs.

"No, don't- it's fine. I don't want you to do that. I just need you to know that I'm never gonna forgive you."

Her eyes meet mine for a sliver of a second, enough for the hurt to register. My teenage self would have reveled in the sight, but I'm too tired. My emotions have dried up for the day. Nothing like a

heavy, years-in-the-making argument to round off an evening.

Neither of us put forward a plan for how to avoid each other on the way back to town, so I walk through the woods with her flashlight beam bouncing in and out of my vision as she trails along behind me, taking soft steps as if she doesn't want me to know she's there. We pass the diner, take the path into town, and where it meets a street corner I say, "see you tomorrow," and she mumbles out a response.

And the next thing I know, I'm standing under a streetlamp, gazing at the neon blue and red *OPEN* sign in the window of the bar. *Welcome*, a separate sign underneath tells me. Welcome. Always welcome here. *Come here and forget*, it may as well say. I tell myself I've earned it and I push open the door.

I don't remember my old street being so... wavy. I laugh at myself. That's a bad joke. I've walked this road, this path up my old front lawn, far more wasted than I am right now.

Why am I here? I came here for something. It's pretty late. Mom will be asleep. Maybe I should be considerate, and leave... nope. Already knocking on the door. She'll be freaking out right now, actually. She almost had a heart attack when she came home one night and saw the light on in her living room - she ducked behind a hedge in the front yard and called me in panic, and when I turned up there was a police car outside and my mother explained calmly that I didn't need to worry, she had left the light on by mistake.

She answers the door in a fluffy pink robe, and even through the tiny slit that the door chain allows, I can see her holding a fire iron. She rolls her eyes at the sight of me. "Pacifica," she hisses. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Surprise," I exclaim, a little too loudly.

Mom shuts the door, and I frown and say, "rude," before I realize that she is unlocking the door chain and opening it fully. As soon as she does, the kitten darts into the yard towards the road - *FREEDOM!* - and Mom scurries after him and chases him around the yard in her robe, which is just about the funniest thing I could ever witness at three o'clock in the morning. She catches him and stands beside me on the porch, looking at me expectantly. "Go inside, for god's sake."

"Oh, *sorry*," I slur, stepping over the threshold. "Didn't realize I was invited in. You don't look too happy to see me."

"It's 3 A.M. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I sing. "I'm good. Look at Toby's little paws, he's growing up so fast!"

"You're drunk. I'll get you some water." She sets Toby down and walks sleepily into the kitchen, switching the lights on for the kitchen and the living room simultaneously.

Jesus, those bulbs are bright. I shield my eyes from the ceiling lamp and make my way to the couch, attempting to sit down gracefully but collapsing instead. "I'm an alcoholic, Mom," I tell her, as she hands me a glass of water. I gulp it down in one.

"No you're not, don't be silly," she says, sitting a safe distance away from me on the couch, as if my delinquent behavior is contagious.

"I am. It's a real thing," I yawn.

"Shush. Lie down and get some sleep. Do you need a bucket?"

I lie back on the couch even though I don't want to, because my mom hypnotized me at a young age to do whatever she says, and apparently that still works from time to time. "You're not listening," I say. "I'm not gonna be sick. I'm gonna be depressed for a week because I've relapsed again," but Mom isn't in the room anymore.

And the light is so bright. I shut my eyes and I'm assaulted by my freshest memory of Mabel, tears shielding her beautiful brown eyes, looking up at me like I'm breaking her heart as much as she broke mine. Maybe I should be nicer to her.

"How do I forgive people, Mom?" I ask her when she comes back in and drapes a comforter over the couch.

She looks at me regretfully, then brushes hair out of my face and kisses my forehead. "I can only hope that one day you do," she says, and when the light goes out my fleeting thought before sleep is that my mom is stupid and ignorant; she wasn't even listening to me.

I awake to the smell of freshly brewed coffee, though I'm soon forced by the morning light to shut my eyes again. I don't know if it's possible to tell how expensive coffee is from its smell, but I think I can anyway, and I therefore deduce that whatever hell I brought upon myself last night led me to my mother's living room.

Before I can decide whether I need to escape, she's standing over me, her hair hanging loose and dazzling in the sun. She pulls up a little wooden table and sets down a glass of water and a cup of coffee beside the couch.

"Water first, then coffee," she instructs me, and when I've worked up the energy to sit up, I comply.

The coffee fast-forwards me through my memories to the moment I lay down on the couch. I violently throw the comforter off of me and stuff it at the end of the couch, because it doesn't feel right, that my mother would successfully pull off an act of motherhood. She watches me curiously, hands on hips, and when I offer no explanation for my spasmodic behavior she sighs and sits beside me on the couch, while I stare into the swirling black liquid in my cup and pray that it will open up and suck me in. The last thing I'm in the mood for on this far-too-early morning is explanation.

"I just got off the phone with Nina," Mom says, which surprises me so much I almost spew coffee all over pristine carpet. "She was worried about you. She said she tried calling you several times last night, and you never ignore her."

"I was busy," I croak. Busy feeling sorry for myself. That counts.

"I told her what you said to me last night. About your... addiction."

My eyes dance over every inanimate object in the room. Anything to avoid her ice-queen glare.

"She sounded surprised that you'd told me. I wanted her to tell me that you were just being dramatic... Pacifica, how could you keep something like this from me?"

I grit my teeth, and come out with the most generic angsty-teenager response possible: "Since when do you care about my life?"

She's quiet for a moment. I listen to the tick-tock of the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. My eyes drift to its pendulum, swinging back and forth, lazily, all day, and I'm irrationally envious. Clocks live such simple lives.

"I know we don't have the closest relationship," she says.

"That's an understatement."

"But for goodness' sake, I'm your mother. You're supposed to tell me these things so that I can *help* you."

I let out a dry chuckle. "Alcoholism isn't like other problems, Mom, you can't throw money at it to make it go away."

"Why are you being so abrupt with me right now? I want to help you, Pacifica, and that starts with you listening to me."

"No, Mom," I say, standing and rubbing my eyes, already exhausted from this conversation. "It starts with you staying out of it. I don't know why I came here last night, really, I don't. I think maybe, deep down, I want to be able to love you, but the truth is, there are a handful of other people who would have welcomed me inside last night, and those people have been helping me since the day they met me. They know all about my problem, and they're far more useful to me than you would be."

"Really?" She follows me into the hall while I search for my shoes - they're lined up neatly among my mother's many pairs in the corner, of course. "And what's Nina going to do from two-hundred miles away?"

"I have other friends, Mom."

"Then where were they last night? They can't be that much help to you if you're still out getting drunk at stupid o'clock in the morning."

I fumble with my heels and glare up at her. "Don't talk about my friends like that."

"Pacifica, there is proper help out there that I can arrange for you. They have programs for alcoholics, support groups-"

"Oh my god, you don't get it," I shout, my limited patience boiling. "I've been through all of that already, of course I have. You have no fucking idea how long this has been going on, do you? None at all!"

Her arms are dead still at her sides. She looks like she might cry, but I've finally shut her up, at least.

"Three years, Mom," I say, and I'm surprised to hear my own voice break. "I was getting drunk right under your nose, while I still lived here, three years ago. And you didn't even notice. So what help do you think you're gonna be now? You had a chance to help me, your *precious* daughter, and you didn't."

"I can change," she pleads. "I have changed. I can be there for you, Pacifica, I promise."

I open the front door, breathe in the calming fresh air, and against my better judgment turn to look at her. "You weren't there for me when I actually needed you. You weren't there for me when Dad died."

The sound of the door closing behind me ignites my self-confidence and lets it burn for all of five minutes, before I'm holding back my sobs, and my tears stain the sun-soaked sidewalk. I don't know whether to turn back and run to my mother's open arms, or continue the battle the way I've always fought it, solo.

Three years ago, I didn't have that choice.

Fourteen

Chapter Notes

Got the date wrong last week. Today is Wednesday, not Tuesday. Whoops.

Going forward, I think I'm going to make more of an effort to respond to your feedback individually. It feels weird that people say such nice things about my writing and I don't really acknowledge it. If I do message you, feel free to ignore me!

This chapter contains themes that more sensitive readers might find upsetting. If you're concerned and would rather know what those themes are before reading, PM me.

In the summer that I was eighteen, I got a phone call from my dad.

And the strangest thing was that I smiled, because I knew he'd be asking what time I'd get to the golf course tomorrow, and it would be a brief talk but he'd end it with a promise that this was the week he would finally best me, and I'd hear the grin in his tone, and I'd be happy for the rest of the night because we were gradually building up to a normal relationship, an actual father-daughter relationship.

I thought he felt the same way.

So I don't know why he did it.

I think I knew, just from his first few words, what was happening. I was sat at the desk in my room, writing a letter to Andrew, and the lamp cast enough light that when I looked up at the window I could see my own terrified reflection overlaying the pine trees swaying gently in the dark, beyond my back yard. I remembered the assembly at school, the chirpy lady they had brought in, who told us how to recognize the signs in our friends, and it hadn't worked, lady. I never recognized shit.

"I'm sorry, Pacifica." He wept, openly, into my receiver. "I'm sorry that I mistreated you. My only daughter. I'm sorry I wasn't a father to you." There was what sounded like a gust of wind, obscuring his next sentence. I stared at the trees, tipping to the right, tipping to the left.

"Dad," I managed, my mouth the only part of my body not in full paralysis. "Where are you?"

"So sorry."

"*Dad*. Tell me where you are."

"I'm at work. No, I finished work... but I'm still at work."

"Are you at your office?" I was up on my feet now, taking the stairs two at a time, keeping my footfalls soft as if any sudden noise would shatter the illusion that everything was going to be fine.

"I can see the world from up here, Pacifica, and it's so bleak."

"Just stay on the line, Dad. Tell me more about the world, okay?" Mom's car keys. No time for a

jacket. No time for shoes.

"I never meant to hurt you. Never wanted to... we were so absorbed in our own lives."

"It's okay, Dad, I forgive you." Ignition. Car started without hesitation. "Just stay with me, okay?"

A single, flat tone.

"Dad?" I looked at the screen. Call disconnected. "*Dad*," I shrieked, the doors of the car suppressing my hysteria for the outside world. I tried calling back and listened to six excruciating rings. I dialed 911. I told the operator I needed them to send someone to the address of my dad's office building, that he was going to kill himself, and they asked me to stay on the line, but I hung up and tried Dad's number four more times.

I could drive. Not officially - I didn't have a license. But I had driven Wendy's van before, and I most likely wouldn't need to parallel park or reverse around a corner tonight. I just needed to get from point A to point B. So I drove. I dialed Mom's number as I careened through town, but she didn't pick up either. I left the phone on the passenger seat and took turns dialing each of my parents, and every single time I heard that pre-recorded voice telling me when to leave a voicemail, my heart sunk lower in my chest. My body periodically seized up and I realized I hadn't been breathing.

I hit the interstate at sixty miles per hour and screamed, because the world went black around me - the streetlights didn't extend beyond the town. The tires screeching were my only reminder that I was still on the ground, as my bare foot dug into the grooves of the brake pedal. I fumbled around on the dashboard and my headlights came on, but they were blinking - hazard lights, I thought - and while they would have accurately broadcast my current situation to other motorists, driving in intermittent light would have been precarious, so I continued to search for the headlights. When I finally found them, my foot slammed on the accelerator and the engine went nuts.

Between ten minutes and an hour into the drive - I obviously wasn't keeping track of time - a diner flew by me on my left, and my eyes latched onto its warm yellow glow projecting into the road. Inexplicably, all I could think was that I could pull over, get a table, sit and sip coffee under the lights and around the people and the quiet music and everything would feel normal until this situation played out on its own. Something inside me screamed that I should enjoy the normalcy in uncertainty while I could.

I was just approaching the exit to Roseburg when the dial tone for my Dad changed - it was shorter now, like Mom's, which meant that his cell phone was off, I thought. And for ten minutes I convinced myself that he was alive, he was sitting on the rooftop of his office building drinking whiskey out of the bottle, and he had switched off his phone because the ringtone was giving him a headache.

The red and blue lights were quite spectacular. They danced methodically on the surrounding buildings and cars, through the gaps in the trees lining the office parking lot. There was a disorderly arrangement of people standing in the road, some of them huddled together, others alone, watching me approach, blinking against headlights. I counted three cop cars and an ambulance. A man in navy blue uniform stepped out in front of my mom's car with his hand up, but my hands had already fallen from the steering wheel, too weak to grip it, and I sailed into him so slowly that his legs ended the car's motion entirely.

I remember floating. Or feeling like I was floating. In reality, the officer would tell me later, when he opened the car door to talk to me I was already unconscious, and I flopped onto the pavement like I was just another body for them to bag up. I woke up within minutes, but I wasn't truly aware

of where I was or what day it was until an hour later, when I was slumped in a cushioned pink chair at the police station, a cinnamon bun and a cup of coffee and a bottle of water set out on the table beside me.

And even that's a little hazy. I often try to remember what the room looked like. There may have been a vending machine whirring, to keep me safe from silence. There may have been magazines on the coffee table. All I remember clearly is a familiar redhead materializing in the doorway and then crouching down in front of me, in a green checkered shirt, and the warmest of arms around my waist and the smell of cigarettes, and the hot stream of tears soaking into her shoulder that I thought might never run dry.

"I'm gonna go home tomorrow."

I heard Wendy rustling under her sheets, and then her bulbous green eyes were staring down at me, her head backlit by the moon pouring through her open window. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. My mom's gonna be back. I don't know if I *want* to see her but I think it would be weirder if I didn't. Plus, it's not fair on your dad. Having to look after me with all your brothers running around."

"Well don't leave on his account. He loves having you around. Apart from the whole..."

"The whole 'queer' thing, yeah, I've noticed."

"It's not because he's a homophobe," Wendy was quick to say. "Honest. He was just a little skeptical about us sleeping in the same room. You know... my dad raised me like a fourth son. I'm sure he's always been curious if I would ever swing for the other team."

"And do you?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. That's the kind of thing you know when you're twenty-one, right?"

"Not always. Some people figure it out later."

She seemed to mull that over for a moment. "Would you date me? You know, hypothetically speaking. If I was gay."

"Why does *everybody* insist on asking me that?"

"Because you never talk to me about it," she whined. "I have no idea what your type is, or anything. Apart from... you-know-who."

"Yeah, thanks for opening up that old wound, three days after my dad died. Real nice."

"I'm sorry."

I stuck my tongue out at her in the pale light. "You're not my type, I'm afraid. Well, I don't know, actually. You would have to quit smoking, that's for sure." One of the reasons I couldn't stay there any longer was that all of my clothes would soon smell like cigarettes. No matter how far away from the house Wendy smoked, she was constantly dragging a cloud of it back to her room that wouldn't dissipate no matter how long we kept the windows open.

I decided that if I held her gaze for too long, with her white tank top and her smooth pale skin and

her hair hanging over the side of the bed, I'd feel something for her, so I looked back up at the ceiling. "If I was into you," I continued, "I wouldn't be sleeping on your floor. I'd be up there with you, touching you in your sleep."

There was nothing but the sound of my own breathing for a moment.

"That sounded way creepier than I meant it to."

"Yeah," she laughed.

I tried to savor those last easy waking moments in Wendy's room. I knew that when I returned home, I would be returning to my solitude, where my darkest thoughts circled above me like vultures, randomly swooping down and plucking at my head. My mom would be home from the business trip that she couldn't have possibly cut short after hearing of the death of her ex-husband, but she wouldn't make much difference to the emptiness of the house, unless the news had unlocked a surplus of emotions somewhere within her, which I strongly doubted.

"How are you feeling, P? We haven't really talked about it. Your dad, I mean."

I shrugged, then realized Wendy wasn't staring down at me anymore. "I don't know. Better. I'm over the initial shock. Now I feel... I don't know. It's like I'm grieving over what could have been, like what our relationship could have been, more than I'm grieving over him."

"I know what you mean," she said, when she was sure I was done talking. "I feel like that with my mom sometimes. I was so young when she died that sometimes when I think about her, I'm not remembering her, I'm just sad that I don't have a mom. And then other times I think about how close I am with Dad, and I wouldn't trade that for anything, not even a mom. Sorry. Making everything about me again."

"It's okay," I yawned. "I like listening to you talk."

"You're *sure* you want to go home tomorrow?"

"I'm sure."

"You'll stay for breakfast though, right?"

I grinned. "And what's for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Bacon and eggs," we said at the same time.

"Oh, okay," she said, throwing a pillow at my cackling face. "Didn't realize we were *boring* you."

I was in the living room when Mom came home. She was two hours later than she said she would be; her plane was delayed, I guessed. She didn't say anything about it. She didn't say anything about me commandeering her car, either. She didn't say hello, or ask me how I was coping. She sat down in her armchair and launched into an uninterrupted plan of action - she would be arranging a funeral, I could help if I wanted to, if I didn't want to that was fine too. We would be visiting Dad's solicitor, an old friend of his who lived in Gravity Falls, some time in the week to read through Dad's will.

"Are you upset?" I asked her.

She looked shocked, like she had never anticipated me interrupting. And when she spoke her tone was frigid, stuck on business mode. "Very. I was married to your father for twenty-five years."

"Then why are you talking like a robot?"

"Pacifica, we've had time to process this. Now's the time to be practical."

"You've had time to process this? What part of a five-day conference did you use to 'process this?'"

"I had the evenings in my hotel room, alone."

"And you didn't think I might need you here? After I listened to my dad's last words over the phone, just before he threw himself off a fucking building?"

"I called you on Saturday morning," she said, and she sounded so confident that that redeemed her for shirking her motherly responsibilities, so I walked out of the room and ignored her for the rest of the night.

That was the same night that I stumbled upon the liquor cabinet in my dad's old study. We had a big enough house that we hadn't needed to repurpose the room in any way after he had moved out, so most of the time we kept the door shut and forgot that it existed. I was feeling sentimental; I think I wanted to find a reason to cry, I wanted to feel like a girl that had just lost her father, instead of the cocktail of spite and indifference that was mixed up inside of me. He had left a few books behind, and the stationery in his desk drawers, but other than that there was little evidence that he had once spent many hours a day locked up in the claustrophobic little space. Instead of a trinket to jog my memory or spark some emotion I found the liquor cabinet, and I poured myself a glass of whiskey, and for the next week or two that cabinet became my port of call every night - I could easily sneak the bottles to my bedroom and put them back when they were empty, and drinking in my room until the ceiling spun was too enticing of a hobby to stop. I downloaded a handful of dating apps and spent hours at a time relentlessly flirting with any girl that was remotely into it, and within two weeks I had my first hook-up, even though my dating pool was severely limited, and I was living in small-town Oregon.

In those early days I didn't have a drinking problem. I simply loved who I could become when I flooded my liver with poison. The walls I had built up around me, my defenses, my insecurities, all of them vanished and in its place came the Pacifica of old, the confidence I had had as a kid that had withered away throughout my adolescence, and I didn't use it to climb up on a high horse and put people down anymore, I used it to dominate the dating scene, to pluck a gay woman out of a crowd, and in some cases, to make straight women question if they were really that into men.

The seniors of Gravity Falls High reached the very last step in their high school career - graduation. I (my mom) had to pay the extortionate sum of fifty dollars to rent a robe to wear, and while I found the combination of black and green ghastly, I had to wear it to, from, and during the entire ceremony, to represent the school. Just before we left the house my mom hovered by the front door, regarded me, and said, "you look really beautiful," like it was fact, more than opinion, and when she disappeared outside I lingered by the coat rack for a few seconds to regain my bearings, unsure whether I was really awake.

Mom even looked proud at the actual ceremony. Not smiling, of course, but she was sat upright with her hands folded in her lap, and her attention was fully on the stage. For a moment I felt guilty that I was getting drunk behind her back every night, but the guilt soon passed, because all she would have had to do to find out about it was knock on my door and talk to me.

Katie was there, too. Her brother was graduating. She was sitting next to the girl I had only seen

pictures of, the online friend she had been planning on dating and was now, presumably, dating. I couldn't remember the name but I remembered the face. She had short blonde hair but a long fringe partly obscuring one of her blue eyes. She was pretty. They looked happy. Katie caught my eye and smiled; I smiled back. Then the guilt set in again, because I hadn't spoken to her since the start of summer, even though she had left comments on my Facebook posts - inconsequential one-liners that screamed *TEXT ME*.

With graduation came the parties. Everybody and their dog wanted to host the ultimate end-all bash, everybody wanted the last word of the senior year, so I attended quite a few. I remember it hit me one night in an acquaintance's kitchen that here I was, turning up to underage teen's houses and guzzling their alcohol, and I had no idea how they were getting it. They couldn't have all had dead fathers and a freely accessible liquor cabinet. I asked around and it turned out there was a liquor store in town that was manned by the owner's son on his weekends home from college, and being a former GF High student who had already survived the tribulations of illegally acquiring booze, he was often lenient with his ID checks.

The parties died out when everyone dispersed elsewhere in the state, the country, or the globe, for college. It was the last breath of summer, and on my runs by the lake I'd slow to a walking pace, let the sun wash over my arms, and I'd look out over the water and see the families swimming and the kids playing and I'd know I had so much life ahead of me, and I felt at peace with the world, and at war with myself. I was living a double life. By day I embraced the outdoors, devoted my time to keeping fit, and by the night I'd grow restless and lecherous and I'd drink and trawl the internet for cheap thrills in the form of young women.

And then every once in a while I'd step out of my own body and look down on myself, and think of Mabel, think that she'd be disappointed in me if she could see me now. Just as quickly as the thought would arrive it would dissipate, and I'd think of contacting her, sending her a rude message letting her know I was actually better off without her, but my disorderly hair and the bags under my eyes and the drink on my breath were dead giveaways that that was a lie, so I never did.

The other problem I had with keeping up my drinking habit was that I soon became broke, and there were only so many times a week I could run to my mom for money for "new clothes" or "to see a movie," so on my way to the accredited liquor store one Saturday I hatched the most shameful idea I had ever come up with.

The college boy was called Chris. He had blonde, slightly shaggy hair, and always the same amount of chin stubble, like he never shaved and it never grew. He was well-built, and attractive, in that gruff kind of way. He always wore flannel shirts and it took me several weeks to notice that he reminded me of a male Wendy, and another few weeks for that to stop creeping me out.

I don't know if Chris was attracted to me or just bored, but all I had to do was lean over the counter and tenderly explain that I was short on cash but that I could offer an alternative form of payment, and his eyes went wide and a smile crept up on his lips, and that's how I started walking out of the place every Saturday afternoon with my backpack stocked up on whatever bottles I wanted. I never *enjoyed* it, because he didn't have boobs, but I didn't hate it either. His room upstairs was small but the bed was cozy. He made me laugh a lot. Sometimes when we were finished he'd light a joint and we'd take turns filling the room with smoke. At the time, our arrangement felt healthy.

It was sometime in late November that I saw my dad's gravestone for the first time. I was thinking about him in my room and I decided I'd take the trek to the top of the hill at the cemetery to see him, a hip flask in the pocket of my jeans, because although my transformation to a shameless slut was nearly complete, even I could recognize that walking around a graveyard with a brown bottle dangling from my fingers lacked class. When he was buried there, I had stayed in the car, fiddling

anxiously with the hem of my black dress, because the thought of seeing an unfinished grave - watching a person be lowered into the dirt and then covered up, for all eternity? It crept me out. Made me a little sick.

The tombstone was so flashy that I laughed, either derisively or wistfully, I didn't know. An immaculately carved hunk of marble, like a traditional arched gravestone on top, but like the lower half of a pyramid on the bottom. It stood tall over its neighbors - even in death Dad was saying *look up here, bitches, this is how much more important I am than you*. Either he had requested it specially or my mom had picked it out.

I probably stood there for ten minutes in silence, wringing my hands, my eyes flickering back and forth between the surrounding hills and the gray sky and those terrifying carvings in the stone, my own last name. I hadn't come there to talk to him but I felt the words fall out of my mouth anyway.

"I didn't cry at your funeral," I confessed out loud, before scanning the graveyard to make sure I was alone. "I thought you should know that. Mom did. I'm not sure why. I guess... I guess she fell in love with you once, right? Maybe she was mourning that ancient version of you. The one from before when I was born."

I swept strands of hair behind my ear at a sudden gust of wind. "I've been down to the golf club a couple of times. Played a round by myself. It's, um, it's hard to find people my age that are interested in playing.

"This feels stupid," I said, refraining from kicking the dirt. "I don't know what to say to you, Dad. I really don't. I *had* things to say to you, when you were still alive. Things that I was sitting on, waiting for a burst of strength so I could say them out loud. And I only knew how much those things were eating me up inside after you left. And now... all I can do is stand here, and say them into the ground, like a fucking lunatic." I let out a shaky sigh. "But it's better than nothing, I guess.

"Part of me would like to tell you that I grew up without the love of my parents. And that you're to blame. Half to blame. And I'm not saying that that led to all of the problems I have today, but it certainly didn't help. I had to seek out love in other places. And I found it, in friends, and one girl in particular, but I invest too heavily in other people. I wind up depending on them too much. Sometimes I drive them away. Like, right now, I'm seeing this guy - well, maybe seeing isn't the right word - I'm hooking up with this guy in exchange for free alcohol, and I'm seriously questioning if I should give up my lesbian identity and ask the guy out just because he feels safe. His room feels safe. He treats me like he *wants* me around, can you imagine that? Feeling wanted? That's what you deprived me of.

"And I can't even explain the feeling, Dad, the feeling that your parents don't like you, that they'd be better off without you. I just hope that you felt it too. You never told me much about my grandparents, neither of you did, but I hope to god that the reason you were so distant with me was because you were treated in exactly the same way, and you didn't know any different. Because that's the only way that I could *ever* begin to forgive you."

I sucked in a breath and out of nowhere, a sob rose up through my throat. I glanced around to make sure nobody was there and wiped my eyes. "And then the other half of me almost wants to hug you. I want you to come back and tell me what was wrong. Tell me how things got so bad, that you had to... that you saw no other way out. If you had just fucking *told* me, if you had said to me what you said over the phone a little sooner, I could have put everything aside, I would have listened. I could have helped you.

"So I don't know. I don't know if I'm angry at you, or if I feel sorry for you, I don't... I don't think I loved you. But I think I could have loved the person you were becoming. I think it's like Wendy

said, I'm grieving over the fact that I could have had a dad. And now I can't."

A nearby tree sighed in the wind, like it was sick of people showing up in its garden and delivering emotional monologues to lumps of rock. I bit my lip and a salty tear flowed into my mouth. I wiped my face one last time.

"I hope you're in a better place now, Dad," I said, and then I turned and forced the tears to die in my throat, swallowed a lemon-sized lump all the way back to the cemetery gates, and walked through town with a straight face and bloodshot eyes.

I stopped at the bar on my way home. My newly acquired fake ID proclaimed me as twenty-one years old, and I had taken to dropping by whenever I had a spare dollar from sponging off my parents. The decor hadn't changed one bit since I played piano there, five years before. The people had. I was usually served by a girl who looked no older than I did, with black curly hair and a smattering of lipstick. I couldn't decide whether I was getting gay vibes from her or not.

She was tending bar on the day that I visited the graveyard. All I asked for was a Budweiser; next I knew she was scrutinizing my counterfeit driver's license, looking up at me and tilting her head to figure me out, the way Mabel always used to.

"Is there a problem?" I snapped. "You've served me before."

"You're twenty-one?"

"That's what it says on the card."

"Don't believe everything you read," she said, like she had rehearsed it, then she passed the license back towards me and folded her arms.

"What's your name?"

"Nina."

"Nina. Hi, Nina. Let me tell you something," I said, leaning over the bar. "I've had a very rough day, so how about you do your job, and pass me one of those beer bottles out of the refrigerator behind you? That's all you have to do."

"What car do you drive?"

I hesitated. "I don't have a car."

"When did you learn to drive?"

"Three years ago."

"When you were fifteen?"

"Yes."

Nina's eyebrows floated upwards while a devilish smirk played on her lips.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Okay. That was- I'm not even mad. I'm just gonna leave." I had half a bottle of Jack Daniel's under my bed, anyway.

As I was leaving the bar, I thought I'd heard Nina tell me to wait up, but I decided I had imagined it, until I was back out on the street and I heard it again. She was running up the sidewalk behind

me with her arms folded, like women sometimes do in the rain, but it wasn't raining.

"What's your name?" she asked me.

"Pacifica."

"What- that's your name?"

I frowned, readying my defenses. "Yes."

"Okay, that's incredible," she said, like it actually amazed her. "Look, I don't want to pry into your life or anything, but I've seen you drinking at the bar by yourself a few times now and I'm not convinced that that's normal for someone your age."

"Gee, thanks."

"I have to listen to... tired old men reciting their life stories, right up to whatever tragic moment led to them sitting at a bar, five drinks in, at 2 P.M. on a Tuesday. And it's *so* boring. But then you come along, a normal-looking girl from the same generation as me, the only person I'd actually *want* to talk to, and you sit there with your head down and your lips sealed."

I was fully aware of that. Why would I have wanted to talk about the most embarrassing habit I had ever developed? Every time I looked up at the haggard souls occupying the neighboring bar stools, I felt a wave of remorse that my life had taken eighteen years to take a nosedive instead of fifty.

"Anyway," she continued, and she hadn't struck me as the nervous type, but she had trouble meeting my eyes at this point in the conversation, "I've just moved back home from college, and I don't have a lot of friends that are still around. If you're going through something and you want to talk about it, I'd be really happy to listen sometime."

My face relaxed as she looked up at me, one eyebrow raised expectantly. "That'd be awesome, actually," I found myself saying.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Thank you."

She smiled and pulled a notepad and pen from her pocket. "Here's my number. Just text me when you're available, and we'll go for coffee or something."

"Okay."

She shuffled her feet around and said, "should probably get back to work. They get cranky if I don't top up their drinks."

"Or if you don't serve them."

"Yeah, that too." She headed back into the bar, waving at me before the door closed behind her.

I crossed the street, gazing at the slip of paper in my hands like it was ancient treasure. Nina had written her name in neat italics just above her number, and although that one phone number felt so much more significant than the others I had recently goaded out of other women, I never thought that two cups of coffee later, we would become best friends.

Fifteen

In my last year of high school, we each had to write an essay on the topic of our choosing, and being an unimaginative soul, I picked mine from the list of suggested research areas provided to us.

I chose to research domestic abuse - the statistics, the various forms of it, but mostly, the outwardly visible psychological effects. The main purpose of the essays were to ready us for the mountains of papers we would be writing in college, and though I had no desire to go to college, I spent tens of hours on that paper. I had my small taste of what college was like, in that week leading up to the deadline of our year-long project, with the cans of caffeinated diet soda lining the desk in my bedroom, and the moments where I'd realize that the reason my laptop screen was so bright was because it had gotten dark outside without me noticing, and typing so fast that my fingers ached every time I lifted them from the keyboard.

I got an A on that project.

So when Mabel walks into the diner one morning with her hair tied back and a purple ring around her right eye, I consider running back to school and telling them to change my grade; I clearly haven't learned shit about recognizing the signs of abuse.

My face just kind of drops, like somebody raised the building's gravity. Mabel walks up behind the counter, where I'm standing, says good morning, cheerful as ever, and immediately goes to work on the cash register, assigning herself tables to serve. Her movements are all mechanical, like she's stuck on autopilot, and the chatter of customers drones on around us, anybody with concern not willing to express it.

Including me. I *want* to say something, like, *what on earth are you doing, sit down*, but I'm shell-shocked. I've never seen such a dramatic entrance delivered so casually.

Thankfully, Lindsay and her motherly know-how are right behind me, and she steps up to Mabel and says, "Mabel, hon, are you okay?"

"Yeah. Oh, my eye? I fell down the stairs. Clumsy." She laughs on the last word, about as forced as laughter can be.

"Don't worry about this for now-" Lindsay shuts down the screen on the register - "come sit down in the break room with me, okay?"

Mabel doesn't put up a fight, just wanders into the back office. Lindsay goes to put a hand on Mabel's back but stops herself. She looks back at me over her shoulder, her eyes brimming with worry, and without even thinking about it I follow them both, and hover in the doorway with my arms hugging my chest. Mabel sits on the couch and Lindsay stoops down in front of her in the limited space, like you would with a child.

"Did somebody do this to you?"

Mabel nods, taking great interest in her fingernails.

Lindsay waits for a beat. "Did Jason do this to you?"

Another nod. I feel myself breathe deep - I was expecting it to take much longer to get to this point.

"When did this happen?"

"Last night."

"Has this happened before?"

Mabel shrugs. I feel the color that had returned to my face slip away again. "Sometimes when we're arguing," she says. "But we both say stupid things, we both... *do* stupid things."

"But you've never hit him," Lindsay says, lowering her eyebrows, trying to understand.

Mabel seems to think about that for a long time. I almost say her name out loud, just to interrupt her train of thought, in case she's weaving a lie to protect her fiancé. But eventually she shakes her head.

Lindsay looks up at me, and Mabel follows her eyes and notices me standing in the doorway for the first time, but she quickly looks back at the floor. Behind me, in the window to the kitchen, Julio is repeatedly slamming his palm against the order-up bell, because his initiative doesn't extend beyond the walls of his kitchen. As much as I'd like to know everything about Mabel's situation, and whether I need to pay Jason a visit with a weapon, I return to running the diner and allow Lindsay's level head to work its magic.

Five minutes later Lindsay joins me at the counter. I peek over her shoulder and Mabel's still sat in the back office, her eyes set on the wall. Lifeless, almost.

"I'm going to call the police," Lindsay tells me, sounding emotionally exhausted. "Mabel just told me that her fiancé is supposed to be home all day. I don't know whether they'll arrest him, or take him in for questioning... did you know anything about this?"

I frown. "If I knew anything I would have told you, Lindsay."

"Yes," she says, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry. I know you would."

"Do you need me to do anything?"

"Just keep holding down the fort." She squeezes my shoulder. "I'm going to call them from the kitchen - I'm not sure Mabel needs to hear it. If her fiancé walks in, call 911 immediately, okay?"

I nod obediently, suddenly hyperaware of the parking lot, certain that when I look up he'll be there, striding to the door with his shirt sleeves rolled up. But the lot is devoid of people. I remind myself to keep an eye on it.

The customers are awfully needy this morning. Before I'm even finished maintaining polite conversation with one table, somebody's waving at me from another, begging for my attention. When I finally have a minute free, I check up on Mabel, whose focus is still absorbed by the wall. She looks up and smiles as I walk in, but again her eyes have fallen back to the floor by the time I've sat down.

I should have thought of something to say to her before I came in. I can't see the bruise from here, but the image of it is burned into my memory, where it will likely remain long after Mabel is healed.

Then she turns to face me, and I *can* see it, and it's far worse than I remember - like a tennis ball is lodged behind her eye socket, pushing outwards, desecrating her skin with angry streaks of red and purple. Her eyelid is only open halfway, and the eyeball itself is glazed over, wet. I convinced myself a long time ago that the sight of Mabel in pain like this would have brought me satisfaction. Now I realize that it never could have. I'm teeming with hatred for who did this to her.

Mabel says, "I'm sorry about the other night."

I shake my head, barely able to recall our argument on the hill behind Northwest Manor. "Don't worry about that," I tell her, and I feel so guilty that she was even thinking about that that I reach for her hand, which she welcomes with a squeeze. "Please don't worry about that."

Before I can say anything else, Lindsay's in the doorway. "I phoned the police," she says. "They're on their way - they'll need to ask you a few questions, is that okay?"

Mabel nods.

"Okay. I'll leave you two alone for a minute."

My first instinct is to call Lindsay back in here, as I'm left alone with the blanket of quiet suffocating me and Mabel. I know that the swelling of Mabel's eye - and everything it entails - far outweighs the significance of our midnight quarrel, and I shouldn't feel awkward just sitting next to her. But it's hard not to when my M.O. in the last few days has been to shun her at all costs. I glance down at my hand, still linked with hers, but I've kept it still for so long that I can't feel it.

"Do you need anything?" I say. "Water? Coffee?"

"I'm okay. Thank you."

I'm not sure who moves first. I think we both realize at the same time that this is silly, and I shuffle closer on the couch and put one arm around her shoulders and the other around her waist. She mimics me, then rests her head on my shoulder, and I stare at the screensaver on the computer and let her apple shampoo fill my nostrils, the stiffness in my muscles evaporating.

A minute or two later she sighs sleepily. "You smell like waffles."

I grin. "Is that a good thing?"

"Mmm. It's nice."

I drop into the booth and slide my phone out of my pocket. "It's been three hours," I huff.

"These things take time, P," Wendy says.

"They'd better not be overwhelming her with questions. You know what the police are like in this town."

"Says Pacifica Northwest, the hardened criminal of Gravity Falls."

"Don't mock me."

"Sorry." She covers one of my restless hands with her palm. "She'll be fine. It's like I said, Mabel's different. She's strong. It takes guts to go out in public right after your boyfriend smacks you in the face. She knew she had to tell somebody, so she came to work."

"Or she was in shock. I told you, she was like acting like a robot, like she was only coming to work because she couldn't think of anything else to do. What if this has been going on for years and nobody could see it? What if she has bruises all over her body and this is just the first time Jason's messed up and hit her somewhere visible?"

"Okay, well maybe that's true, but it's no good worrying about it when we don't know the facts yet. The important thing is she's safe now. It's over."

I shake my head. "It's not over until he's behind bars."

"I agree with you. But let's stay calm until she gets back. Here, something to distract you," she says, tilting an empty coffee cup at me.

I narrow my eyes. "You said you were going to help me manage the diner."

Wendy shrugs. "I already mopped those tables."

"You *mopped* the tables? You're not supposed to mop the tables, Wendy. Jesus Christ, I need a distraction from *you*," I groan, standing and dragging my feet on the way back to the counter.

It's 4 P.M. - five hours after they left - that Lindsay and Mabel return to the diner.

"Is that them?" I call out, at the sight of a silver car pulling into the parking lot. I then remember that Wendy left half an hour ago, to begin her ridiculous two-hour commute to the nightclub she works at along the coast, so I've just shouted to an empty table. I get a few strange looks as I hurry to the door, and then stroll back to the counter because despite everything, I don't want to look too desperate.

Both ladies offer me a weak smile when they walk by the counter. They hover by the door to the back office while I press random buttons on the cash register, pretending to be busy. I don't hear every word they're saying, but I catch the gist - Lindsay wants Mabel to rest in the office for a while but Mabel wants to go straight to work. Eventually Mabel gives in and slumps onto the couch, her head back, her eyes shut.

Lindsay rests a hand on my shoulder. "How about you take off early?" she says softly. "You've done more than enough work today."

I nod slowly. I'm tired, but I can't really imagine being anywhere else right now. It doesn't feel right to leave Mabel here, wallowing in despair. "How is she?"

"She's okay. She was very calm throughout the whole thing, but it took her a little while to open up about the full history of the abuse."

I swallow. "And?"

"She said she'd like to tell you about that herself."

My eyes rest on Mabel, her steady breaths raising the hands folded over her stomach. Who'd want to hurt that dainty little thing?

"They've arrested Jason," Lindsay says, which startles me out of my trance. "He'll have to appear in court tomorrow. I'm not sure what will happen from there, but, if the judge deems him to be dangerous, then he'll most likely go to prison."

"Does Mabel need to be there too?"

Lindsay nods, and my heart sinks a little. "She'll need to confirm everything she told the police today in court. If you ask me, the bruise around her eye is more than enough evidence, but hey-ho. I was going to set her up on my couch tonight. I don't like the thought of her alone in that big house. Then tomorrow I'll take her to the courtroom. I'll have to close up the diner for the day - I won't ask

Beth to run the place herself. Poor girl, you know how panicky she gets."

"What if Mabel stayed with me? You could pick her up in the morning and drive her to court, I'll come here to help Beth, and then we can switch again when you get back."

"Are you sure you're okay with that?"

"Yeah," I shrug. "I have the spare room anyway. Probably better than a couch. No offense," I add. "Your couch is lovely."

Lindsay grins. "Alright. Well, you're free to go. Mabel could walk home with you now."

"Yeah." Mabel looks over at me, like she sensed an end to the conversation. I don't avert my eyes and we end up in a staring contest that's one part amicable and two parts awkward. "Should probably ask her first," I realize, frowning.

She smiles up at me when I walk in. "Hey."

"Hey. Do you wanna sleep at mine tonight?"

After a moment she nods, with a hint of enthusiasm. "Okay."

"Cool," I say, my mind having run out of words. It dawns on me that my apartment will probably be very quiet all evening. Like... every other evening. "Um, we could stop at the Shack first. Grab a change of clothes."

"Right." She glances down at the slim-fitting button-up and the gray skirt that qualify her as a Greasy's waitress. "And an eyepatch," she adds, smirking at me.

That night, there's a thunderstorm. I emerge from the bathroom, fresh and pretty, because there's only so long I can walk about my apartment smelling like a bacon cheeseburger and fries. Mabel is perched on the windowsill in the living room, hugging her knees, gazing out into the dark, and the bright flash of lightning washes over her for a second, but she doesn't even flinch.

"What are you doing?" I ask her, dumping my bundled up Greasy's uniform on the couch.

"There's lightning," she says quietly.

I hover in the living room and stare at her, all ominous, with the occasional flashes of light and the rain pattering on the window. If it wasn't her good eye on show, it might be heartbreaking to watch.

Suddenly she's looking at me. "You don't like it?"

I shrug. "What's there to like?"

"It's like a free light show."

"A free light show that can kill people."

She tilts her head. "Is that actually true?"

"Yes."

"Is it, though?"

"You wanna go grab onto the nearest streetlamp and find out?"

"Come here," she says, waving me over. "Statistically, the safest place to be in a lightning storm is in a car."

"We're not in a car," I say, standing a couple of feet back from the window and watching over her knees.

"I know. I didn't say it was a *relevant* statistic."

A giggle escapes my mouth; sounds just like I'm fifteen again.

Mabel smiles down at me. "I washed the dishes."

I turn and glance at the neat arrangement of plates and bowls and cutlery beside the kitchen sink. "You didn't have to do that."

"You cooked."

"I put a pizza in the oven." And, most of the dishes I had piled up were the wreckage of my filthy eating habits over the last few days. Washing dishes around here is no easy feat, what with all the oats often cemented to my cereal bowls.

Mabel shrugs. "That's still cooking. If you hadn't done that, the pizza would have been frozen."

"Can't argue with that." A fork of lightning is branded into the sky, and I see it a second time when I blink. *It is* kind of cool. "Come in here," I tell Mabel, walking over to my bedroom. "We can see better."

At the far end of my room there's a double-paned window much larger than the one in the living room. I sling a couple of scattered shirts and a bra to one side of the room with my foot, clearing a path to the window. I sense Mabel poking around with her eyes, getting a lay of the land, and I try to recall if I've left anything incriminating out on display. Other than the bra, I think I'm okay.

We silently watch the lightning momentarily bring my neighbor's yards to life, illuminating bushes and sheds and a sandbox as if it's daytime.

"I don't know what I'm gonna do tomorrow," Mabel says eventually. "I have to tell them everything Jason did to me while he's... there. While I'm looking him in the eye."

I choose my response carefully, and it still sucks. "You don't have to look at him."

"I know that now. But tomorrow, I won't. He'll look at me, with fear in his eyes. He'll plead for me not to- not to... I don't know."

I frown. "That would be manipulating you. That's what this is all about - if you don't give in to it, just for one day, tomorrow, you'll never have to deal with that again."

"He isn't always bad," she says, picking at a fingernail. "You know, it's not like I was permanently unhappy. There were times that I wouldn't have traded for the world. It's hard to imagine him locked up somewhere, not at home with me."

I have no idea what to say to that. If the idea of her, at home, *with him*, is running through her head, then she's a lot further away from rationality than I thought she was. "Then don't imagine what will happen to him, imagine what would happen to *you*. How many more times can you bear

being punched in the eye?"

Mabel turns to me, the evidence now in view. She looks surprised at my bluntness.

"And if that's not enough," I continue, taking one of her hands, "then think about someone else. Think about another sweet, young girl, and imagine Jason going home to California and doing the same thing to her."

The thunder punctuates the thought, and another flash of lightning highlights tears in her eyes. But I'm getting through to her; she nods.

"Tomorrow will be hard. But get through it, be strong, for a few hours, and you'll make the world a safer place, just by a little bit. You'll be a hero."

"You're right," she says, voice wet. "I can do it."

I wrap her up in a hug, and wait for her sniffles to die out in between bursts of thunder. "Lindsay said that you wanted to tell me the full story."

She steps back and nods.

"But not tonight," I say for her. "You should get some sleep."

Sixteen

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains themes that might be upsetting to more sensitive readers. If you're concerned and would like to know what those themes are in advance, you can PM me.

She sits on the opposite side of my kitchen counter, cradling a cup of tea. Her hair hangs loose, behind her left shoulder and in front of the right. There are bags under her good eye. She woke up late - the hearing wasn't until 11 A.M. - but I can imagine that the hours before dawn were mostly restless. Now, with our dinner set aside, she looks like only a bed would bring her solace, but she has insisted that she will stay up and tell me the darkest bedtime story I'll hear for a while - the one about her long-term relationship with an abusive man.

Jason has been sentenced to six months in prison. That isn't long enough, but it's something, and according to Lindsay, it's far more justice than what often comes from these cases. When he gets out, contacting Mabel in any way will be seen as violating his parole, which will make him susceptible to further jail time. While this news has settled *my* stomach, Mabel looks more depressed than I've ever seen her, because she is still very much in love with her imprisoned fiancé. And although I'd like to reach across the counter, grab her by the shoulders, and tell her that she should *not* love a man like Jason, I'm smart enough to recognize that I need to treat this situation more delicately.

My heart thuds along faster with every silent second that passes, because the longer it takes her to collect her thoughts, the more intricate the story becomes. I patiently draw circles with my finger on the countertop, until finally she looks up from her tea and speaks.

"I guess I'll start with the time that you came to visit us in Piedmont. At New Years'."

And then my heart's threatening to rocket out of my chest, because apparently we're going to talk about *that*, too - the kissing, and the empty promises, and the betrayal.

In the winter that Mabel was sixteen, she drove me to a bus station in San Francisco and kissed me in her car, and told me that in the coming summer we could try taking our friendship to another level. We could go on a date. And at the time, that was what she wanted. Or what she thought she wanted. Or what she *didn't* want, but what she wanted for my benefit. She simply didn't know.

In the same vein, Mabel didn't have a clue about her sexuality. She didn't know if she preferred beards or boobs or skirts or biceps or vaginas or penis-

I laugh against my will.

Mabel's eyes snap up. "What?"

"Sorry. Just- you don't need to give me the full anatomy of men and women."

Her expression lightens up for the first time today, with a smirk. "Are you twelve years old?"

"No. I'm sorry. Please carry on."

"Are you going to let me tell the story my way, or are you going to keep interrupting?"

"I'm going to let you tell it your way."

"Good. Okay then."

So, anyway, Mabel was confused about her sexuality.

When school started back up in January, Mabel became so bogged down with her responsibilities and commitments that for the most part, she was distracted from thinking about me. She had been promoted to captain of the cheerleading squad at the start of junior year, she had volunteered as an organizer for the senior prom in May, and she was tutoring multiple freshmen in English out of her bedroom - *the knowledge slut*, her friends called her - all because she had a hard time saying no to helping people.

And on top of all that, and the daydreams of marrying a guy fighting for her attention against the daydreams of touching, kissing, and holding hands with girls, Mabel was well aware that the gorgeous charmer who often served her at her local coffee shop was paying Mabel a lot more attention than his other customers.

It had started out as a crush. She would always sit on the side of the booth that gave her a view of the counter, and because she was always in the company of the same four friends, and the conversation often landed on the same few topics, she would find her attention drifting to the young man serving coffee, with the thick beard and the slick gelled hair. It was a crush, nothing more, and outside of the man's appearance in a couple of Mabel's dreams, she didn't think about him very much.

Until Elise told Mabel that the guy was checking her out. It was just the two of them - they were working on an assignment together and had stopped at the coffee shop after school.

"What?"

"He keeps looking at you."

He was somewhere behind Mabel. "What's he doing?"

"He's cleaning tables, but he keeps looking at you."

Naturally, Mabel started panicking. "Do I have something in my hair?"

"No."

"Maybe he's checking *you* out."

"No," she laughed. "Definitely you."

"Shit. How old do you think he is?"

Elise shrugged. "Thirty?"

Mabel slapped her hand. "Be serious."

"Twenty, at most."

He was twenty-one. She found that out by hunting him down on the coffee shop's website and typing his name into Facebook. It was still a crush, but now there was something bubbling in her stomach every time she approached the counter for her mocha latte and he was there, because he always looked at Mabel like her coming in was the highlight of his day, and she had watched him serving people for long enough to know that that wasn't his typical demeanor.

And then one day in February, Mabel was grocery shopping after dark because the Pines had run out of milk. She put a tub of instant coffee in her basket and the familiar voice said from behind her, "I didn't peg you as the type to drink crappy coffee."

Mabel spun around with her mouth hanging open. "That's for my dad," she blurted out. "I don't drink it."

At the terror in her voice, the boy's grin began to fade. "Mabel, I was messing with you."

She gazed up at him, wonderstruck. "How do you know my name?"

"I write it on your cup every time you come in."

"Oh," she laughed. "Yeah."

"How are you, anyway?"

"I'm good, I'm good. How are you?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I, uh-" he stepped closer, like he was about to disclose all of his secrets - "I was hoping to run into you outside of work, actually. I don't usually do this, but... do you have a boyfriend?"

Mabel's brain was screaming. "No."

"Could I get your number? I know we haven't really talked much, but... well, I'd like to."

"And in my head I was like, *yes*, I'll give you everything you've ever wanted, you beautiful bastard!" Mabel looks up. "Sorry. Too much?"

"A little," I say, wincing.

"Okay." She takes a long sip of her tea, then holds my gaze for a few seconds. "I gave him my number, he told me his name. Then... it gets a little more depressing from there."

As soon as he turned away, and Mabel was warped out of her fantasy land and back to the banality of the grocery store, basket dangling from her hand, she felt awful. She realized that her and I were not dating, and may never be, but after swapping spit at that New Years' party, handing out her number to somebody else still felt dirty. Like cheating. And that night when I was texting her, and she was receiving texts from Jason at the same time, she felt sick to her stomach.

I, of course, was not informed of the new man in Mabel's life, but she came very close to telling me

on numerous occasions, sometimes drafting a wall of text on the notepad on her phone, and never sending it to me. If I'd known about Jason, I probably would have sprinkled my texts with less heart emojis and blatant attempts at flirting, that's all.

They went on their first date a week after the grocery store encounter. Mabel put her hair up in a bun, wore her snazziest top, and told her family that her friend was throwing a small party - but more of a fancy gathering, without alcohol, obviously, and the kind of party that Dipper wouldn't be invited to, not that she thought Dipper was a loser or anything, just that it was a no-boys-allowed kind of party, yeah, that was it, and while some parents might have grown concerned at their daughter hyperventilating out an explanation for where she was going, Mabel's mom and dad didn't bat an eyelid.

She met Jason at an Italian restaurant on the outskirts of town, and although she was nervous at first, Jason's tranquility was contagious, so she slipped into the easiest conversation she had ever had.

It came in waves, after that - the guilt that she was hiding a boyfriend from her bestie, followed by the tremors of excitement that surged through her whenever she thought about him. Some days she would walk into school as bright as the sun, and other days she would be stalked by a fat rain cloud.

Their relationship moved fast, as did everything in the life of Mabel Pines. Within a week they were making out in the back of his car, and within a month they were having sex in his apartment. One day she dropped into his coffee shop after school by herself, murmured dirty things to him over the counter, trying to make him blush, and then when he brought her coffee over, there was a beautiful silver chain wrapped around it and a heart-shaped locket. She was smitten.

And all the while, she didn't tell a soul. Mabel was well acquainted with all of her parents' predispositions, and dating a boy five years her senior was sure to be a huge no-no in their books. She couldn't tell her friends, because they couldn't have kept a secret if their lives depended on it, and she couldn't tell Dipper, because he would have started turning up at the coffee shop on an incognito mission to find out everything about Jason, and conclude that Jason wasn't fit to date his sister.

It was early in May that Jason hurt her for the first time.

He was two hours late to meet her at her house, and he wasn't answering his phone. With her parents at one of those middle-aged-people parties where they sip wine and mentally compile a list of things to bitch about on the drive home, and Dipper at a friend's, this was literally the first time her house had ever been free for a rendezvous with her secret boyfriend.

Jason was a technophile, and he had enabled a setting on his top-of-the-line phone that permanently tracked his location and broadcast it to anybody that knew his email address. It sounded absurd to Mabel, but on this one occasion, she felt no shame in opening up Google Maps and pinpointing the location of her boyfriend.

She found him outside a burger restaurant, on a picnic table that had been set up adjacent to a row of dumpsters. He was with his three friends - and roommates - and they were stacking empty beer cans as high as they could. Children with building blocks. Mabel folded her arms and watched, incredulous, but none of the boys noticed her. She had to walk up behind Jason and tap him on the shoulder.

He swiveled around, totally off-kilter, and frowned down at her. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

"What am I-" Mabel grabbed his hand and dragged him away from the table, even if Jason's friends were too preoccupied to eavesdrop. "You were supposed to meet me tonight. At my place? I've been calling you for the last three hours."

"Oh, I'm sorry babe," he said, with such a poor attempt at remorse that Mabel was thrown off guard. It was like a drop of alcohol had transformed his personality, in an utterly unflattering way. "I totally forgot."

"You forgot? That's it? Jay, I've been reminding you every day for the past *week*. I'm leaving in two weeks, I'm gonna be away for the whole summer. This was the only chance I was gonna get to show you around my house, in like, forever. Does that not mean anything to you?"

"Well we can go now. I mean, if you're okay with the guys hanging out too."

Her mouth dropped open. "The guys? Obviously not! I don't give a *shit* about 'the guys.'"

"Hey, come on," he said, as if Mabel was the one in the wrong here. "Those are my friends."

"I'm aware of that. They are also the people you *live* with - are you telling me you honestly can't go an hour without them by your side? Because that's pretty pathetic."

"Keep your voice down, would you? They're staring."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Mabel shouted. "I don't want your *stoner* friends wandering around my house making the whole place smell like a weed farm."

In one motion, Jason turned his back on the table, obscuring Mabel from his friends' view, and grabbed her arm, right below the shoulder. That alone set off alarm bells in Mabel's head, but when Jason began to clamp down with his fingernails through her sweater, she surveyed her surroundings for any sign of help. But she didn't trust any of Jason's friends, and the restaurant they were outside of sat on the corner of a desolate intersection.

"Let go," Mabel said, trying to keep her voice as still as she could.

"You're acting like a fucking lunatic."

"Jason, you're hurting me."

"Are you going to calm down?"

"Yes," she squealed, and when she felt his grip loosen she yanked her arm back, immediately covering it with her other hand. She looked up at Jason but she couldn't hold his stare for long - there was madness in his eyes. Barbarity.

The wind picked up, and for a moment the only sound in the vacant parking lot was the rustling of palm trees and Jason's friends trading undecipherable banter. Mabel hugged her arms to her chest, the air feeling thirty degrees colder all of a sudden.

"Do you need me to drive you home?"

"I'll walk," she said to the ground.

"Alright." He stalked back to his friends.

Somehow, she suppressed the tears all the way back to her front door. In the safety of her bathroom, she took off her sweater and her t-shirt and held her shoulder close to the mirror. The

skin was pink, and half-dried drops of blood surrounded the three piercings his fingernails had made. She touched each of them and flinched; they'd be sore for a couple of days.

She turned the lights off in her bedroom and lay flat on her back in bed, so that her family wouldn't bother her when they got home. She didn't move for hours, just stared at the ceiling with her mind running wild, never deciding on one coherent train of thought. What was she supposed to do now? She didn't want to believe that the fairytale she had been living in for the last few months had been nothing more than a facade.

So she tried not to believe it. The next morning when Jason texted her a string of apologies, she accepted them. When she met up with him later that week, he held her for a long time and apologized again, and Mabel melted into him in disbelief that somebody so soft could ever be so abrasive.

But ever since that bruise on her arm, she had found her thoughts often fluttering back to me.

"Me?" I'm finding it hard to keep my mouth shut after every sentence.

"Yes. You."

"Why?"

"I kept thinking that I'd made a huge mistake. I was so excited to date Jason, and when we started dating I was convinced he was the perfect guy. And I kept thinking that I'd had the chance to date you instead, and I hadn't taken it. And now I was on my way up to Gravity Falls and you were gonna be there waiting for me, and I hadn't even told you I was seeing someone else."

"But you didn't want to date me," I say, shaking my head.

"I did. I wouldn't have told you that outside the bus station if it wasn't true."

"No, hold on, that doesn't make sense. If you *wanted* to date me, you wouldn't have hidden away from me as soon as you arrived. You remember the day that you drove up here? We hung out in the Shack for all of twenty minutes before you locked yourself in the attic and went to bed."

"Because I didn't know how to tell you. I knew that you were still expecting us to... you know, be together, and I didn't know how to tell you that I'd met somebody else, and that in doing so I had forgotten all about you. My best friend. Every day it got harder and harder to tell you until I couldn't even imagine doing it anymore."

I take a breath and rub my forehead. If she were to repeat that a hundred times over, it might start to make sense. "Sorry," I say, placing my hand on her wrist. "I know this isn't what the story should be about."

"No, it is, though." She turns her wrist over and takes my palm with hers. "If I had just told you about him, you would have helped me. I mean, if I had told *anyone* they could have helped, but you literally wouldn't have let me go back to him. And then... well then I wouldn't be sitting here with a black eye. I wouldn't have had to hide my bruises for years."

She's right. I would have been upset about her having a secret boyfriend, but after a few weeks of crying were out of the way, I wouldn't have let her stay with him. I would have assured that she broke up with him while I was in earshot.

"Pacifica," Mabel says, swallowing hard. "That summer, I was messed up. I was so awful to you, and to Jason. I mean, I don't care that I was awful to him, that doesn't matter anymore."

Her hand escapes mine, and when I finally tear my eyes from hers, I see her slip the silver ring off her finger. I hadn't expected her to still be wearing it. She slides it across the counter and leaves it next to our dinner plates, which is a remarkable display of composure. I can only imagine what I'd do with it in her situation. Toss it in the trash, toss it out the window, stomp on it a few times, try and break it with my teeth, lose all of my teeth, go to the dentist, ask the dentist to break it with their drill.

"I'm not trying to make up excuses for what I did to you, because there aren't any. But that night at the lake house, when I followed you up to your room, I think that was my cry for help. That was me trying to escape him. While we fell asleep I had this vision that I'd wake up in the morning beside you and we'd be together and everything would be fine. Then when I actually woke up I realized that I'd cheated on my boyfriend. And I never, ever thought I'd cheat on anybody, but I had. I'd sacrificed my morals. And at the time, the only way I could think to make up for that was to run back to California and be with him."

I know - I *know* I shouldn't be feeling sorry for myself opposite a girl who just escaped an abusive relationship. But I can't help myself. I've waited so long for an explanation and now that I'm hearing it, it's simply unsatisfying. Maybe I never needed an explanation, or an apology. Maybe some things do just hurt forever, a little pinprick every time they pop into your head.

"Is any of this making sense?"

I shrug. "Maybe in a few days. Once I've thought it over properly."

She looks down at her hands, tears glazing her eyes.

I reach over the counter and take both of her hands this time. "I'm not mad at you, which I think is a good sign."

I smile when she smiles, which is also a good sign. I think. But then the final memory I have of Mabel from that summer flashes through my mind, and my eyes widen. "Oh my god. I *slapped* you. I hit you, after Jason already hurt you, I..."

"It's okay," she says, leaning forward. "It's okay. I was never scared of you, or anything, like I was of him."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's fine, really. I deserved a lot more than a slap in the face."

My head shakes back and forth. "You didn't."

"I'm not saying I deserved being beaten around for years. I mean... it doesn't matter, anyway. I was never angry at you about that, okay?"

"Okay," I say, but as I study the bruise on her face I'm questioning what makes me any better than her ex-fiancé.

Mabel doesn't have a lot to say about the years that followed.

Her relationship with Jason was made up of patterns. Their spells of happiness lasted, on average, two months at a time. During those spells, they were models of true love. In public, they were the gushy, touchy-feely couple that all of their friends envied, and further down the line, when their families were introduced to the budding romance, they were so naturally sweet around each other that any concerns about their age gap were quashed within a month. And then in the privacy of Jason's apartment, he would do something to rub her the wrong way, and Mabel would mutter something under her breath, and he would see no other course of retaliation than to push her into a wall. The same pattern, over and over, like clockwork. The only difference was that each time, her determination to draw the line and dump his ass faded just a little further into the distance. She began to accept the reality she had chosen. After all, she had been told all her life that relationships were complicated, and this was exactly that - a complication.

She took most of the beatings on her upper arms and shoulders. Sometimes on her back. Cheerleading became difficult as her upper body strength and peppy attitude were gradually sapped away from her. She wore a white t-shirt under her other clothes at all times, so in the locker room after practice she wouldn't have to reveal her shame to the squad - all those girls that could have helped her.

Things only got worse when college started. Her admittance to the California State University in Sacramento opened up what her parents called a perfect opportunity, and what she considered a perfect storm - she could move in with her boyfriend, who was now living alone and working in Sacramento himself. And that meant she would be seeing less of the Jason who floated around Piedmont like an angel, keeping up appearances, and more of the Jason who occasionally saw her as his personal punching bag. In the end, she applied for a dorm room anyway, claiming that it would be more convenient for her - true, but she also applied for a dorm room so that there would be somewhere to escape to.

The contrast drove Mabel insane. One night they were out late at a frat party, and when Mabel dragged Jason away from the newest batch of douchebags he had taken under his wing, because she had an early class in the morning, he was so irritable that he waited until they were back in his car, then he backhanded her cheek. Flummoxed, Mabel jumped out of the driver's seat and started running down the road, yelling over her shoulder for him to drive himself home, but Jason was chasing her along the residential street, stammering out apologies with his voice breaking. Eventually Mabel stopped and keeled over, giving in to her own tears, and Jason was there, and she fell into his arms because she was alone in a new city. She had nobody else to run to. "Not the face," she pleaded, into his chest, while he stroked her hair. "You can't hit me in the face. Not where people can see."

And he didn't.

Until a couple of nights ago, at least.

She got home from her shift at the diner. She took off her heels and set them neatly among her other shoes. She walked into the living room, kissed her fiancé on the cheek, and sat next to him in the armchair without thinking much of his unresponsiveness.

After a minute, barely audible over the TV, he said, "What's that girl's name that works at the diner?"

"Pacifica?"

Jason nodded. "Thought so. Quite an uncommon first name, isn't it?"

Mabel fidgeted on the chair until she was facing him, wondering where this was going. She wasn't

anxious at all, until Jason reached for the remote and switched off the TV. "Mhmm," Mabel hummed. "Kinda like Mabel."

"Right. Tell me," he said, frowning at her, "is there anything I should know about Pacifica?"

"Like what?"

He shrugged. "Well, I didn't know she was gay."

"Yeah. Why does that matter?"

A few heartbeats of silence. "I didn't know you were gay either."

Mabel shook her head, tried to grin. "I'm not."

"Really? Not even a little bit?"

"Jason, what are you talking about? I've been with you for four years. I only ever dated boys before that. Where is this coming from?"

Jason stood up, took a swig of his beer, and began pacing the room. Mabel swallowed. This was always how it started.

"I was at a bar earlier tonight," he said, pausing to dig his toes into the carpet. "It's out in the woods. Place called the Factory. You ever been there?"

"A couple of times."

"I got to talking to this guy there. His name was Hassan. Started telling him what I was doing in town, told him about you, and he said he remembered you."

Mabel furrowed her brows as she tried to put a face to the name. She came up blank.

"Do you remember him?"

"No," she said. "Honestly, I don't."

"He was at your seventeenth birthday party."

"That's possible. It was a surprise party, some of the people there I recognized from the Factory, but I didn't know them by name. Wendy and Pacifica probably invited them to boost the numbers."

Jason nodded, seemingly accepting the answer.

Mabel felt a sudden surge of anger, defiance against being interrogated like this, in her uncle's home. "What the hell does this 'Hassan' have to do with anything, anyway?"

"He also knew Pacifica. They went to high school together. He told me that you and Pacifica were the best of friends."

"We were."

"Best friends? Weird, then, that you never mentioned her until a few weeks ago. After you'd already introduced us. And even weirder that she served us at the diner before then and she barely acknowledged your existence."

Mabel's throat constricted, because she suddenly had full clarity as to where this was going. Jason knew about that one night up at the lake house. She wasn't sure how that was possible, but she was going to have to get used to it, and fast. "We didn't talk for a long time. After I stopped spending my vacations here we fell out of touch."

"Mhmm. And why was that?"

She shook her head and held on to hope. "No real reason."

"Hassan was under the impression that you two were a little more than besties."

Again, a streak of fury. She stood up. "Well I don't even know who Hassan is! Are you going to trust your fiancée or a random stranger you met at a bar?"

"No, see, that's the thing. Maybe I wouldn't have listened to him, maybe I would have told him to shut the fuck up and stop spreading shit about my future wife, but it wasn't just my chat with Hassan, was it? It's the fact that you've been disappearing with this girl for hours at a time during the night, it's the fact that you waited until *now* to tell me you were 'best friends,' and, here's the best one - I had to search the whole town the other morning only to find out you'd slept in her apartment all night, without telling me shit."

Mabel knew, at this point, that there would be no positive outcomes to this argument. Her fiancé had traversed too far down the spiral of rage. She could, at least, begin to tell the truth now, and minimize the damage. "We kissed," she said, her eyes cast to the floor. "Once."

Jason scratched his beard. "When?"

She swallowed. "I don't remember."

The punch came so fast that she had no time to raise her arms. No chance to soften the blow. *Crack*, his right hand, into her right eye. Her ears rung and her vision blurred as she staggered backwards to the wall and slid onto her rear. She channeled every ounce of her dwindling strength to lift her hands to her face, to block any subsequent punches, but through her fingers she saw Jason pacing back and forth, consumed by the monster inside of him.

Then he was crouching in front of Mabel, and she hung her head, hot tears stinging the skin around her beaten eye. "Come on, Mabel, look at me," he said, like he was trying to get a kid to look at the camera. "Tell me it was just one kiss."

She wouldn't look at him. "It was more than once."

"When?" he pressed, showing no remorse for her feebleness. "When did it happen, Mabel?"

"I told you, it was more than one time. I can't remember all of it."

"When was the *last* time?"

"My seventeenth birthday."

He was silent for a moment. Mabel couldn't see him, so she tensed her body, prayed to god that one punch was all the fight he had in him for tonight.

When his voice did come, only inches away from her balled-up form on the floor, it was smaller. Like Mabel had broken a part of him. "Six months after we got together," he said.

She heard him stand and walk elsewhere in the room. She would not look up. Half of her fought to remain strong, knowing that one hiccup in her fidelity was not deserving of the years of bruises she had endured. The other half of her wanted to cry into her partner's arms and tell him how sorry she was, that she never meant for him to find out, that she never wanted to hurt him like that. That half of her would come to life if she looked up and saw him visibly working through the turmoil.

So she didn't look up.

The tears fell to her knees, soaked into her jeans. She listened to faint footsteps on the carpet for a few minutes, then to silence for another few. There was no way of knowing how long she had been trembling on the floor until the clock on the wall began to chime, startling her out of her protective stance. Eleven o'clock. Though she had trouble looking through her right eye, she slowly scanned the room and saw that Jason had gone. His beer bottle lay on the table beside the armchair, empty. Mabel waited for the last of the clock's chimes to fully stop rattling in her ear, and then clawed at the wall to help her stand up.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep her legs from shaking, but she didn't let it stop her from tiptoeing through the house's entryway and out the front door, across the gravel driveway, and into the back seat of her car. She didn't think to drive. She didn't think she'd be able to. She didn't think much at all.

The shock kept her awake for several hours. An owl kept her awake for another. But in the blink of her eyes, it was morning. She pushed herself up from where she had sprawled across the back seat, and squinted against the aggressive daylight. That in itself sent pangs of pain through her eye, and then she made the mistake of touching it with her fingers. Even keeping it closed hurt. She caught a glimpse of it in the rear-view mirror and gasped at the swelling, and almost, *almost* brought a fresh onslaught of tears, but she stopped herself in case that was going to hurt the amorphous red blob even more.

She checked the time on her phone. 9:09 A.M.

She looked out the window at the Mystery Shack. Then she turned her head the other way, and looked out at the road.

The Shack. The road. The Shack. The road.

Jason would be in the Shack. If this was anything like their regular altercations, she could walk back inside, and Jason would be awake within the hour, and he would come downstairs and they'd hug and they'd kiss and he'd make her an extra-big breakfast with all of her favorite delicacies under the sun. Just his way of saying sorry.

And then the road led to the rest of the world, a world full of people that weren't at all like Jason. People that wouldn't beat her. People that she could learn to love just as much as she loved her Jason. People that could help. One of those people would be at the diner, right now.

Mabel dug around in the center console for a hair tie and smoothed her wily locks back in a ponytail. She straightened out her work uniform with her hands. Clutching onto the door handle, she took one last look at the Mystery Shack. She could go inside for her car keys, but stepping over the threshold of the door might have been all it took to fall back into his arms, and that wasn't what she wanted. She hopped out into the warm morning air. She straightened her back, squared her shoulders, and took her first steps along the road to the rest of the world.

Seventeen

Chapter Notes

Hey! Welcome to Part Two: Our Getting Better, which inadvertently sounds like the title of a Scrubs episode. I just did a quick Google search to make sure it isn't actually the title of a Scrubs episode.

So you're all aware, I've updated the chapter-count thingy. There are 8 chapters left, including this one. Thank you, as always, for reading and commenting and sprinkling your juicy kudos all over me (not in a weird way).

PART TWO: OUR GETTING BETTER

I've never been one to longingly gaze at the clock while I'm at work. Most days, I'm content to slave away until Lindsay reminds me that my shift is over, and the diner's usually too busy for me to keep track of time anyway.

I know why today is different, though it's a little embarrassing to admit. It's different because Mabel is at my apartment, and while we've only been apart for a grand total of eight hours, I'm looking forward to seeing her. Now, how did that happen?

Things have been different since our candid chat after dinner, two nights ago. After I had overcome the devastating imagery of Mabel being shoved around, and then cried a little when she lifted her shirt and showed me the bruises on her back, all of the resentment that had hung over us during our pursuit of Ford's final words just sort of disintegrated. I can breathe easily around her now. Last night, we ate ice cream on the couch and teamed up on one of those giant crossword puzzles. That's it. That's all we did. And I had more fun than I usually would at any party.

We haven't talked at all about her returning to the Mystery Shack. As far as I'm concerned, I have an available room, she's recovering from a traumatic experience, and neither of us enjoy being alone. Seems like a no-brainer to me.

My apartment has never been squalid, by any means, but I certainly wouldn't say it has been *clean* since... well, since I viewed the place, when it was full of somebody else's furniture. I like to leave clothes on the floor so that I'm always a few steps away from switching up my outfit. You could call it living on the edge. Nina was persistent about keeping the place in order for the first six months that she lived there, then she gave up.

When I walk into my living room this afternoon, I nearly drop my keys on the carpet in shock. I feel like I've stepped into a montage at the end of one of those home makeover shows. The carpet is freshly vacuumed, the end table by the door that I usually dump my keys on now actually has room for my keys, the barricade of shoes between the door and the couch has been rearranged in the corner. Several pairs that I thought I'd lost one half of have been reunited; my bunny slippers that I'd lost entirely have magically reappeared.

"Holy shit," I blurt out, my eyes hovering over the rest of the room and the equally monumental changes.

The supposed culprit spins around in the kitchen and yanks out her earbuds, a spray bottle in her rubber-gloved hands. "Hey hey hey," Mabel says, chipper as ever. "What do you think?"

"What did you *do*?"

She raises one shoulder. "I cleaned it."

I take off my heels and set them beside the others, fighting the habit to fling them at the back of the couch. The carpet feels nice between my toes as I venture further into the unfamiliar space.

"Mabel, it's incredible. The TV is all shiny."

"You like it," she says, exhaling loudly. "For a moment there I thought I'd overstepped."

"No, it's great." I look over at her leaning on the breakfast counter, and frown. "But why?"

"Cabin fever. I told you I should be back at work. Did you speak to Lindsay today?"

I walk up to the other side of the counter and sigh. "She still thinks you need time. I tried to tell her you were ready to come back but she doesn't agree. And frankly, neither do I. Whenever I'm going through something... difficult, it usually takes me at least a week before I can function like a human again."

"But it doesn't make any sense. Why would I want to sit around by myself all day and let my brain implode? Working keeps me distracted. Hence-" she gestures to the sparkling kitchen appliances- "shininess."

I think about it for a moment. She really does seem like my polar opposite, sometimes. "I'll call Lindsay tonight. Let her know about the shininess." I smile at her. "That bruise is healing fast."

"I know! When I looked in the mirror this morning I almost didn't recognize myself. I think I was starting to get used to it."

I peer over her shoulder at the stove and frown even harder than before, if that was possible.

"What's bubbling?"

"I started dinner," she says, turning back to a cooking pot and stirring. "Only I don't know a lot of recipes, so you're getting my famous spaghetti bolognese. And I *used* to say that in an Italian accent, but Dipper told me it was so far from accurate that it was offensive, so I stopped doing that."

"It's not even four o'clock," I point out, moving around the counter and peering into the pillar of steam above the pot.

"I know, but yesterday when you got home we busted open that giant bag of chips, and then the ice cream. And while I have no regrets, we can't make a habit out of that or we'll both be signing up for fat camp."

"What is this?" I ask, holding up some kind of vegetable. "Did I have this?"

"No, I went to the store. That's also where I got these," she says, waving her gigantic yellow gloves. "I know what you're thinking, but it was fine. It made the checkout girl a little uncomfortable, but that was all. Plus I had my shades on when I was outside."

I relax against the counter as she continues to clean it. "You're a lot braver than I am."

"No I'm not." She points the spray bottle at me. " *You* were not supposed to be home yet. I was going to have dinner all laid out for you."

"A clean apartment *and* my dinner on the table? I've always wanted a housewife."

"Then that is what I shall be," she says, but her grin eventually gives way to something more serious. "Honestly, this is the least I could do. You've been so good to me. I really want to thank you."

My insides knot up, caught off guard by the warmth. "It isn't totally selfless. Believe it or not, I like having you around."

By the time I've finished my shower, Mabel's serving bolognese onto two plates at the counter. I whip my wet hair a few times and sigh in contentment. "It's like a hotel in there," I tell her. "And not a trashy one, either. I've never felt cleaner in my life."

My stomach sinks a little when I spot the bottle of wine and the two glasses beside our plates. Mabel picks it up and tips it in my direction.

"None for me," I say, taking my glass to the refrigerator. "But I'll drink water out of the glass so you can pretend you're not drinking alone."

"I stopped at the Shack earlier to pick up some more of my stuff, and I found this in the kitchen. Figured I'd gone too long without a drink. Are you sure you don't want any?"

"I'm sure." I take my place in the stool opposite her. "You, um, went back to the Shack?"

"Yeah," she sighs. "It was a little weird walking up the driveway. My heart was pounding, like I expected him to still be inside. And then when I was inside it just felt... empty."

"Do you know when Stan's supposed to come back?"

"Nope. Last I heard, he was in Mexico. No idea why Ford sent him there. He calls my parents from time to time."

"Hmm." I pick up my fork and dig into the spaghetti, and my taste buds explode. "Oh my god, Mabel. This is amazing."

"You like it? It's been my go-to meal all throughout college. You get pretty good when you cook the same recipe five-hundred times."

Mabel shovels a substantial forkful of spaghetti in her mouth without a second thought, and I have to fight to hold in laughter. It's funny to watch her eat like a slob after spending her whole day being a clean freak.

"So I'm going out tonight," she says, taking a swig of wine.

"Oh yeah? Where?"

"To the theater. I should clarify, I'm breaking in to the theater. Not watching a play. And you're welcome to come, I just didn't want to ask you because you've done so much for me already."

I try to push down the ridiculous ounce of hurt that she would willingly go without me. "I'll come. Don't want you to fall off the roof or anything trying to get inside."

"Cool. Wendy's going to help us too. I spoke to her earlier."

I nod. Makes sense - Wendy often tells the story of how she managed to break into a museum in London once. And while I drunkenly laughed along to it the first three times, after the tenth recital it became a little unsettling. A small-town theater will be a piece of cake for her.

She pulls up in her van outside the theater as recklessly as she usually drives, almost crushing my foot under her front tire.

"You're late," I tell her, and she is. Mabel and I have been shivering in our hoodies for half an hour, the climate having clearly forgotten that it's July.

"Sorry guys," Wendy says, coming around the front of the van in a t-shirt and shorts. "My dad wouldn't let me borrow his gun."

"His- Jesus, Wendy, we didn't need a gun."

"What if there's a security guard?"

I gape at her but she squeezes my cheek and grins.

"I'm kidding. Lighten up." She turns to Mabel. "Hey, little dude," she says warmly, and wraps her up in a hug. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," Mabel says into her shoulder. "Just trying to stay distracted. Even if it means becoming a criminal in the process."

"I'm pretty sure nobody uses this place anyway," Wendy says, leaning back on her van and pulling out her cigarettes. "And by the way - still mad at you guys for not taking me to your old house, P. What the heck? Breaking into an abandoned building, and you didn't think to call me."

I shrug. "Sorry. It wasn't much of a challenge. We just hopped a gate and the doors to the house were open."

Wendy exhales a cloud of smoke and eyes the building fifty feet behind us. "Yeah. This'll be a lot tougher," she says, pacing to the gravel path leading up to the theater.

It's an old building - two stories tall, made up of weathered brick, black-out windows at the front. To its right, down the street, sits an equally worn down warehouse. Like a lot of places in this town, the theater is surrounded by overgrown plots of grass, and backs onto an infinite expanse of forestry. The sun is setting somewhere behind the trees, but it's totally obstructed by thick clouds, washing the theater and its courtyard in a dull gray color.

Wendy stops halfway up the path and places a hand on her chin, like she's appraising a house.

"This could take a while," I murmur to Mabel.

She nudges my shoulder. "Let her do her thing."

"Her *thing*? Watch her walk right up to the front door and try to open it."

We follow Wendy further up the path and come to the glass double doors. She lifts her hand to her forehead to peer inside, and then pushes the door, but it doesn't budge. Mabel smirks and swats my shoulder before I can say anything.

"Let's walk around the back," Wendy says. "They might have left a door unlocked."

I glance behind us, back at the street, suddenly feeling way out of my depth. This has always been a problem of mine - blindly following along on other people's adventures and then waking up halfway through, wondering how on earth I got there. I'm banking on a door being unlocked, because I'm not actually about to break into a building, am I?

The side of the theater is one long stretch of brick, no windows. Near the end, we come across the back of a fire exit, one of those gray, metallic doors. Wendy, in her infinite wisdom, steps back and charges at it with her shoulder, but bounces off with a clang that echoes around the woods.

"For god's sake, Wendy," I say. "Are you trying to get us arrested?"

She swivels her head around pointedly. "Do you see anyone out here that's gonna arrest us?"

Before I can respond to that, Wendy rams the door a second time and accomplishes nothing but creating more noise.

"Stop! You're gonna break your shoulder."

"Unlikely," she says, which is true. Growing up as a lumberjack's daughter - swinging axes the size of her head - has left her with a lot of bulk in her upper arms. I have no doubt that with a little persistence she could break this door off its hinges, but with Mabel standing idly by, I'm clearly the brains of this operation - or at least the most lawful person here.

"Let's just wrap around back to the front. If we don't find any easy way in, we'll have to leave and come up with a better idea. Remember that Ford's already been here, and he definitely wouldn't be doing... this," I say, gesturing to the dent in the door.

The back wall of the building is lined with what I can only assume are old props and backdrops, most of which look like they've been disintegrating for years in the sun and the rain. Halfway along this wall, there's a small wooden door that looks older than the building itself, chipped at the corner, almost inviting us to break in. There's no handle on this side - just a keyhole.

"This looks more promising," Wendy says, stepping up to it, but I grab her arm.

"Do *not* break the door down."

"I'm not gonna break anything." She pulls a thin metal rod out of her pocket - like a straightened paperclip, but sturdier. "I'm gonna pick the lock."

"You don't know how to pick locks."

"Sure I do."

"Since when?"

"Since forever," she says, kneeling on the concrete and peeking into the keyhole.

"Then how come I'm only just hearing about it?"

She turns to me and frowns like I'm the dumbest person on Earth. "Because we've never needed to pick a lock until now."

Mabel looks at me and shrugs. "Can't argue with that."

We don't hear a peep from Wendy for a good five minutes. She calls us back over to the door, and pushes it open with smugness oozing from her face. A smell that I can only describe as church-like emanates from inside. I scrunch up my nose - I only really associate churches with funerals. Mabel high-fives Wendy and saunters into the dark without a care in the world, and Wendy follows her. By the time I've surveyed the area to make sure we're not being watched, they've already found the light switch and begun looking around inside. I leave the door wide open behind us, in case I get terrified enough to bolt.

I count two dressing rooms, a kitchen, a back office, and two storage rooms full of props and musical instruments. Zero rats, zero spiders, zero ghosts. The place isn't as decrepit as I thought it would be; I find a playbill for a local theater group's rendition of *Hamlet* that debuted only three months ago.

The three of us walk around silently on our own curious investigations of the backstage area, and then Mabel finds the rope to pull apart the giant red curtains, opening up to a hundred empty seats, but she stops halfway through and walks out to the gap in the curtains.

I eye her curiously. "You alright?"

"Oh my god," she says, to the nonexistent audience. "Holy crap, I've been here before. I mean I put on a play here before."

"You did?"

"Yeah," Wendy says, coming up behind us. "The puppet opera."

"My sock opera," Mabel adds, turning to me and beaming.

"Sock... what?"

"We knitted ourselves as sock puppets," Wendy tells me. "It was creepy as hell. Then Mabel wrote this ridiculously long script and performed an entire rock opera with sock puppets. A sock opera."

I frown at Mabel. "Were you high? How come I've never heard about this?"

"I'd honestly forgotten all about it. The whole thing was to impress some guy who turned out to be a fruitcake." She shrugs and points at her eye. "I have poor taste in men."

Wendy widens her eyes at me when Mabel turns back to the auditorium. I'm glad I'm not the only one mildly shocked that she dropped that joke so casually.

"Mabel," I say, "Ford's clue said something about socks."

"That's right, it did." She pulls the slip of paper from the pockets of her hoodie. "*You'll find me in the theater, right beneath your socks.*"

Wendy glances around. "Did you leave any of the puppets here?"

"I don't think so... no, they all got destroyed, remember? We had to throw them in the trash. Poor Sock Mabel. She was so innocent."

I tap my foot on the stage a couple of times, letting the sound flutter around the theater. "Your sock puppets were up here. So *right beneath your socks*..." I point to the hatch in the center of the stage.

Mabel clicks her fingers and points at me. "You're *smart*, I knew there was a reason we brought

you along."

I hunch my shoulders. "I'm the brains."

"Ooh! That's fun. What am I?"

"You're the looks."

She kneels down beside the hatch and squeezes her face. "Yay!"

"What am I?" Wendy says.

"You're the one that nobody really wants to be around."

She punches my shoulder, hard.

"Ow! Okay, you're the *muscle*. Geez."

"Sweet. Can I be the charm, too?"

"What? No, you only get one role."

"Says who?"

"Says every trio ever."

"Um, hello? Hermione was the looks *and* the brains."

"That's true, but you're definitely not a Hermione."

"I can be a Hermione."

"No, you're more of a Ron Weasley."

"Why am I a Ron Weasley?!"

"You're the dumb redhead that nobody really respects."

"Okay, you are getting on my friggin' nerves tonight, P." Wendy wrestles me into a headlock while I choke out my laughter.

"Guys," Mabel says, poking her head up through the hatch and placing a toolbox on the stage. A cloud of dust attacks her face and she coughs it away. "Check it out, there's a note on top. *Only to be opened by Mabel Pines. If you need to move this box, please return to its original position at your earliest convenience. Thank you.*"

"Oh shit," Wendy says, releasing me. "That sounds like Ford, alright."

"Yeah," Mabel says, and then she just stands there, half-underground, staring at the unopened toolbox. After a moment Wendy and I sit down either side of her. "I get so nervous every time I'm about to open these. Like, this could be it. Right here."

Wendy's face softens and she picks up Mabel's hand. "We're right here for you, dude."

I take her other hand, and she smiles gratefully up at both of us. "I, um, I can't open it now."

"Why not?"

"No, I mean, you're holding my hands. I literally can't open it."

"Oh," I say. "Right." We each let go of her hands.

Mabel places her palm on the lid of the toolbox, and then swiftly flips it open. Her face lights up; she reaches into the box and slips a crude sock puppet onto her hand, a relatively giant pair of glasses taped to its front, and gray hair drawn on with a marker pen.

"Aww," Wendy says. "That's so sweet."

I resist the temptation to say something negative about the handiwork. Mabel sets the puppet down at her side and pulls out a sheet of paper, straightens it out on the stage, and shuts the toolbox.

"Here's my attempt. What do you think? You can be honest. I'll try not to be too offended."

Mabel frowns at the page. "That's all it says." She turns it over, and on the back we're confronted by a maze, drawn in the same gray marker with edges so neat that it looks printed. Without a word we help Mabel out from underneath the stage and follow her to the small office we found on our way in. The maze itself isn't at all difficult to solve - within a minute of finding a pen Mabel finds the way through.

She holds it up to the light on the ceiling. There isn't a whole lot of sense to it - we now have a line zig-zagging through gaps in other lines seemingly at random.

Wendy's the first to vocalize her confusion. "What if that isn't part of the clue? What if he was just eating at Chuck E. Cheese's and that was the only paper they had for him to write on?"

Mabel rotates the page around so that we see it from every angle, then drops it on a desk and exhales. "My head hurts."

"Hey, we've figured everything out so far," I tell her. "We'll figure this out too. It's only a matter of time."

"How long do you have left in Gravity Falls?" Wendy asks.

Mabel shrugs. "The semester starts some time in September. So... six weeks?"

"That's plenty of time. You said Dipper finished this in two weeks, right?"

"Yeah, but Dipper is a *lot* smarter than I am."

"That's not true," Wendy says, putting an arm around her and guiding her back towards the stage. "Besides, you have Pacifica. She's a wizard at puzzles."

Their voices drown out as I stare down at the page. I study the maze at every possible angle, mentally explore some of the unvisited routes leading off the main path, but nothing stands out at all. A sense of dread washes over me, not unlike how I felt when we found that jumbled up map under the water tower. What if this is it? What if nobody ever finds the solution, and Mabel never finds her uncle's last words? That would eat me up inside.

When I rejoin my friends, they've closed the hatch in the stage, and Mabel is delivering some kind of Shakespearean monologue to Wendy, her audience of one. When Mabel hears me coming, she pivots and stops talking immediately, like she'd forgotten I was even here. "Hey, you like acting, right?"

"Not... really?"

"Yeah you do. Remember that character you used to play, Miss Chievous?"

My skin flushes and Wendy yells out a laugh from the front row of seats. "What?" she shouts.

I *did* have a character called Ms. Chievous. She was a stereotypical rich bimbo who slept around a lot and liked to brag about it. But I only liked playing her because whenever I launched into the character, Mabel would act as my timid husband who had trouble keeping his wife in check. And as pathetic as it sounds, I got a thrill out of talking to Mabel like we were in a relationship, no matter how dysfunctional it was, and how real it wasn't. That's all there was to it - it was a silly little game to entertain a crush. I didn't expect her to remember it.

"You weren't supposed to tell anyone about that," I say.

"She was so good," Mabel tells Wendy. "She used to do a voice straight out of *Real Housewives*."

"You mean her regular voice?"

"Har-har," I say. "Fuck you."

Wendy claps her hands together. "You guys should do a scene from that play."

"What play?"

"Mabel was just talking about a play she was in."

"Yeah," Mabel says, turning to me. "*Welcome Back to Your Life*. It was an original production we put on in college. I played a girl whose boyfriend - the main character - he comes back from the war, but he's changed so much that the girl doesn't love him anymore. It was *so* good. I saved part of the script on my phone, actually, I loved it so much." She pulls her phone out of her pocket and starts tapping. "I cried the first time we performed this part on stage, real tears."

"Show me," Wendy says, clapping her hands again. "Show me show me show me."

I plant my hands on my hips and glare at her. "Since when are you so interested in theater?"

"I'm not," she says. "But I love war stories and I love romance stories."

"It isn't really a romance story," Mabel says, looking up from her phone. "My character splits up with the protagonist and he doesn't find anybody new by the end of the script."

"Wow, spoiler alert," Wendy calls out.

"Here," Mabel says, handing me the phone. "You can be Robert. I'm Katrina."

"Oh, so this is happening? I have no say in this?"

"It'll be fun! Take a moment, breathe some air, close your eyes. Try and get into the mind of Robert. You've been home for four weeks. Five of your closest friends - including your best friend, your best friend from birth - they all died by your side, on the battlefield. Every time you close your eyes you hear the gunfire, and the explosions, and the screaming. You've had three hours of sleep over two days and you're just finding out that your high school sweetheart has been spending a lot of time with an older man who lives down the street, both while you were away, and since you have come home. Now open your eyes, and read the first line."

My eyes flutter open to the back of Mabel's head. I look down at the phone. "Did you sleep with him?" Jesus, what a place to start.

She paces further along the stage, her arms folded, her back to me. "Does it matter?"

"What do you mean *does it matter*? Of course it fucking matters!"

"Why?" she yells, turning back to me. "I've already told you how much time I've spent with him, isn't that enough? Why do I have to spell it out for you, Rob?"

I'm so entranced by the emotion on her face that I forget to look at the phone. "Whoa. Shit."

The girl switches straight back to Mabel, and tilts her head. "That isn't in the script."

"She's improvising," Wendy says.

"Yeah," I laugh. "I'm improvising."

"Shall we take it from the top?" Mabel says, ignoring us.

"Okay. Okay, I got this."

We repeat the four lines I was able to get through, and I don't stumble backwards at her reaction this time.

"Just answer the fucking question, Katrina," I say.

"Yes," Mabel says, pinching her forehead, feigning exasperation. "Yes, I slept with him."

"So you cheated on me?"

Her expression softens as she looks up at me. "You were thousands of miles away."

"And that makes it okay?"

"No," she says. "No, but... you just don't *get* it, Rob, you don't know how hard it was for me, how lonely I felt."

"How hard it was for *you*?" I'm surprised at how much anger I've just plucked out of nowhere.

"You wanna talk about loneliness? Try walking back to your camp in the black of night, through mud, and rain, and *blood*, and *corpses*, try witnessing your friend's body explode into pieces, and then having to shut your eyes and sleep that night, so you have enough energy to wake up at the crack of dawn the next day, just so you can do it all over again!"

"And I never asked you to do any of that!" Mabel shrieks. "You knew what you were signing up for when you enlisted, you knew that despite all of the horrible things, that was the life that you wanted, and I had to bite down on my tongue so fucking hard, so that I wouldn't get in your way. I never asked for you to leave, did I? I never asked you to leave me here."

"You told me you'd love me forever. You said you'd be here for me when I got home."

"I was eighteen, Rob. You were nineteen. What did either of us know back then?"

"We knew that we were in love. Isn't that enough? We still *are* in love, we can make this work, Katrina."

"No, we can't. We're two completely different people, now."

"That doesn't matter if we still love each other." I freeze up reading the next part of the script - there's a little snippet of scene direction. I look up at Mabel. "Is that the end?"

"No," Mabel says, as if trying to keep her patience. "There's a little more. You were doing so good!"

I glance down at the phone again, look over at Wendy, who is literally on the edge of her seat, and back to Mabel. "It says here I'm supposed to kiss you."

Wendy laughs. "*You* hesitated at a lesbian kiss?"

I glower down at her. "It wouldn't be a lesbian kiss, I'm playing a dude."

"Oh yeah."

"It's only acting," Mabel says. "This is the emotional climax of the scene, this is the tearjerker."

I look back at the screen, totally at a loss for words. I can't decide if kissing her would be heavenly or torturous.

"Can I try?" Wendy says, and it's hard to tell whether she's bailing me out or if she does actually want a turn.

"Be my guest," I tell her, practically leaping off the stage and handing her the script.

I relax into the chair that Wendy warmed up for me and let my heartbeat simmer back to a regular pace. I made the right choice, I think. Kissing Mabel has never resulted in anything good in the past.

Wendy offers a lot more conviction to the role than I did, which surprises me. They repeat the scene from the top and when it comes to the kiss, Wendy doesn't wait around. She cups Mabel's face in her hands and darts right in, and I assume it's part of the script that Mabel gives in to the kiss for a few seconds, her eyes fluttering closed before she wakes up and pushes Wendy away.

"Well I don't love you," Mabel says, convincingly teary-eyed. She turns around and hurries behind the curtain, and after a couple of seconds she calls out, "and scene." I applaud them both as Mabel walks back into view and bows.

"And you call yourself straight," I say to Wendy. "That was the gayest thing I've ever seen!"

"It's called *acting*, P. Don't be jell."

She's kind of right. Out of all the emotions settling in my stomach, jealousy prevails, which is very inappropriate. The worst part is I can't decide which one of them I'm jealous of most. I know firsthand that while kissing Mabel is playing with fire, she's up there among the best kissers I've ever laid my hands on. And then there's a part of me that has always been curious about kissing Wendy. Can't help that - the girl exudes passion. And I've always been like that anyway - if I'm friends with a girl, I'm eventually going to wonder what it would be like to smother them with my mouth, and occasionally I'll lack the self-control to stop myself from actually doing so. It's just because I have so much love to give. That's my excuse and I'm sticking with it.

We leave the theater exactly how we found it, to our best memory, aside from the toolbox that Mabel carries out in her arms, Ford's sock puppet and maze tucked inside. Unless we were caught

by hidden cameras, there's no trace of us ever being there. Night has fallen, and we follow the path back to the road through the moonlight.

"That was fun," Wendy says, when we're back at her van. "Let me know when you figure out what building we're breaking into next."

"He really was a bit of a hooligan in his dying days," Mabel says. "I hope it doesn't escalate. What if he tells me to rob a bank or something?"

"Then we rob a bank."

I lower my brows at Wendy. "I don't think we do."

"We should do something fun though, Mabel, while you're here," Wendy says. "Maybe a night out in Portland."

Mabel gasps. "I would love to. It's been *so* long since I've gone out with just my friends."

Wendy hugs her from the side and both of their eyes turn on me. "We can catch up with Nina as well, can't we?" Wendy says.

"Yeah," I say, much quieter than intended.

Mabel's eyes soften. "What's wrong? You don't wanna go?"

"No, I will. But I'll probably skip the, um- the night out part."

Wendy frowns. "What? Don't be dumb, you'll be fine. We'll keep an eye out for you."

"Why would we have to keep an eye out for her?" Mabel asks, all innocence.

"God dammit, Wendy."

Wendy lets go of Mabel and looks between the two of us, confused. "Wait, P, you haven't told her? Oh, I'm sorry, I assumed-"

"It's fine. I, um, I have a little bit of an alcohol problem."

Mabel's reaction is pure sympathy, which for some reason doesn't feel patronizing coming from her.

"But it's under control. I don't drink anywhere near as much as I used to. And I'm trying to get sober completely. It can be a little difficult if everybody's drinking right under my nose, but it's fine. I'll deal with it."

"Well we won't go out drinking then," Mabel says. "We can do other stuff. We could see a movie. Or go bowling."

"It's fine, really. I can control myself. I'll survive on Coca-Cola."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. It'll be fun, anyway. I haven't had a night out in a while either. Unless you count... this."

"We definitely don't count this," Wendy says, hugging me from the side now. I'd ask her if she's drunk right this instant, but I think she's just happy to be around friends. Being a prolific partygoer,

she has a lot of acquaintances in the area, and not a lot of people she's close with.

Wendy gives Mabel and I a ride back to my apartment. I'm tired enough to go to bed right away, so I brush my teeth and drink a glass of water over the sink. Mabel asks me if she needs to hide the bottle of wine she was guzzling at dinner, but I tell her no, I'm not that impulsive, even though that isn't true whatsoever.

At about 2 A.M. I wake up with my bladder complaining, and notice the strip of light under my bedroom door. I throw on a shirt and open the door. Once my eyes have adjusted to the overhead light in the kitchen, I find Mabel's body flopped over the counter, sleeping peacefully, her cheek pressed into the sheet of paper out of Ford's toolbox. There's a notebook just beside it, where she has scribbled zigzagging lines and other doodles that appear to be unrelated to the puzzle. I might just be hazy from sleep, but a strong feeling of admiration washes over me. I tuck a few long strands of hair behind her ear and give in to the temptation to stroke it. Impossibly silky. Talk about winning the genetic lottery.

She doesn't wake up until I shake her shoulder - gently, because I'm terrified she'll mistake me for Jason. Her eyes open and she sits up, stretches her arms, and looks at me like she can't quite remember why I'm here but she's happy that I am.

"You're welcome to sleep here," I say softly. "But you might have some trouble with your back in the morning."

"Sorry. I must have passed out."

"Made any progress?"

She groans. "No. I've traced the route to every dead-end, and they're all just... squiggly shapes. One of them looks kind of like an 'L', but I don't see what that would have to do with anything."

"Maybe it'll become clearer in the morning."

"Maybe."

Mabel's still at the kitchen counter when I finish up in the bathroom, so instead of going back to bed I stand beside her, poring over the maze again. It doesn't feel right ending the day on such an unsatisfying note.

After five minutes or so she speaks up. "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"When did you start drinking? I mean, when did it start becoming a problem?"

"About three years ago."

She hesitates, drawing something in her notebook. "Because of your dad?"

I glance up at her and she looks back, clears her throat.

"You don't have to answer that if you don't want to."

"No, it's fine. It was... yeah, it was because of that, but it was also because of school. And because I didn't know who I was. And partly because of you, too."

She looks down at her lap, wringing out her hands.

"I'm not blaming you. I just missed you a lot. More than I think you know."

"I missed you, too," she says, her eyes shifting back to me. "I tried to call you when I found out about your dad. But it only rang once and I got your voicemail."

"You could have tried from a different phone," I say, hating myself for saying it. *Are you really bringing this up again? At least let her recover from her four years of trauma first.* "Sorry. That sounded stupid out loud."

"No, it's... I should have. I was scared of what you would say to me. I knew it had been a year but it still felt so fresh."

"Like if we talked we'd just continue arguing from where we left off."

"Yeah."

And it's true - in the first year that we had no contact I regularly fantasized about what I'd say to her if she reappeared in Gravity Falls, and it was never very pleasant.

"Pacifica... you can tell me if I'm overstepping, but it sounds like I missed a pretty big chunk of your life while I wasn't here. If you're willing to talk about it, I'd like to listen. You listened to my story, and it helped me a lot."

I nod slowly. Funny how a few weeks ago I wouldn't have trusted her with anything. A smirk tugs at my lips. "Have you got all night?"

Eighteen

Two weeks go by, and the August heat encourages my AA group out of the air-conditioned community center and onto the spacious lawn out back, right under the sun, which feels counter-productive. But I don't complain. Sarah serves lemonade to us all. I refrain from telling her that the sunshine makes me crave beer.

Mom's waiting for me in the parking lot when I'm finished. The initial silence in today's ride home lasts for roughly seven minutes. An improvement, for sure. I had no idea that screaming at my mother about how disappointing she is - *used* to be - would have affected her so badly, given that it never got through to her in the past. Since that morning I stormed out I've apologized, but she always deflects it, asks me something about the AA program. It's very conflicting; she goes out of her way to help me, like with these lifts to the meetings, and then when I try to talk to her she's as unresponsive as ever.

But today, she speaks first. Progress. "Are you sure you don't want me to drive you tonight?"

I snap out of singing a song in my head. "Yeah, I told you. Wendy's driving."

"I don't mean to be rude, but I've seen that girl's driving."

I groan. "Mom, you're not much better."

"Says who?"

"Says the stop sign you ran three blocks back."

"There was a stop sign?" She tuts and glances in the rearview mirror. "They really ought to make those things harder to miss."

"They're... bright red and right by the side of the road, what more could you ask for?"

It's totally unexpected, but we both laugh at the same time, followed by mirrored smiles. The woman still baffles me. I can't escape the feeling that she's going to drop the act at any moment, that she'll turn around and reveal that her shift in character has been driven by an ulterior motive. I wonder how long she'll have to keep up her motherhood before that feeling goes away.

"If you get into any trouble, you'll call me, won't you?"

"What kind of trouble am I going to get into?"

"Like, alcohol-related."

"What am I gonna do, accidentally down a shot of tequila? I'll be fine, Mom. Honest."

There's a strip of wall in my living room that used to be completely blank, save for a wall clock with dead batteries. That wall has now been consumed by the investigation into Ford's maze; we taped up a copy of it, along with the map of Scuttlebutt Island, and a handful of pages from Mabel's notebook with various shapes and squiggles, which most of the time only serve as a record of our failed attempts at solving the maze. Mabel's standing at the wall when I get home, which has become a standard occurrence - same as how she doesn't greet me when I walk in. We spend so

much time together now that a grandiose hello after two hours apart feels pointless.

"Any new developments, Chief?" I say, walking up beside her and studying the wall.

"Ooh! Are we doing a detectives thing now? That's cool. Keep calling me that."

"Okay. In that case I'll repeat my question - any new developments, Chief?"

"Nope. Nada. I've been dividing the maze up into squares, like the map here, seeing what happens if I rotate the pieces, which is giving me a freaking headache. There's like a billion combinations, and that doesn't even include if I have to move the pieces around, too. But I find it odd how you *can* divide the maze into sixteen pieces, like, the walls line up with the edges of the squares."

"Have you got the original map? What if you rotated the pieces of the maze exactly how you rotated the pieces of the map?"

"Way ahead of you, sister. That was the first thing I tried. If you do that the maze becomes unsolvable. Anyway, how'd your meet go?"

"It was okay. I told them about going to Portland tonight."

"Did any of them say it was a bad idea?"

I shrug. "It's a judgment-free zone. But, who knows what they were thinking. It doesn't matter. I told them I have some wonderful friends to look out for me." I pinch Mabel's shoulder and wander over to the counter to flick through the stack of junk mail that somehow winds up on our floor five times a week.

"Wendy's picking us up at four, by the way."

"Mhmm."

"And I might go to the grocery store this afternoon, if you wanna come."

"Sure," I say, walking back over to her.

"I wanna get one of those giant watermelons we saw the other day."

"You're never going to eat the whole thing."

"I know, but whatever we don't eat we can cut out of the rind, and then we can use the rinds to drink out of. Trust me, it's delicious. It might not be as exciting with non-alcoholic drinks, actually, but I'm sure we can come up with- why are you grinning?"

"I just noticed that your eyes look the same. It's totally healed."

Mabel tilts her head and smiles sweetly. "I noticed that this morning. Must be your apartment. It has healing properties."

"Clearly. I guess you'll have to stay here forever."

She rolls her eyes. "If only. What's the commute to Sacramento State like from here?"

"Um, worth it?"

"I don't disagree. Just a little impractical."

The nerves kick in at around 2 P.M. It's a foreign feeling - I'm a connoisseur of nightlife, there shouldn't be a bar on Earth that can make me anxious, but I've been out of the game for too long. Add in the fact that tonight could be a major turning point in my rehabilitation, and it's no wonder I'm on the brink of hurling up my lunch. I know it should be easy, but try telling that to my hyperactive imagination.

The outfit I pick out is a blue sleeveless shirt with a floral pattern, and a gray tube skirt. It's an atypical combination for me, from the far reaches of my closet, but I like how it looks in the mirror with my hair down, kind of summery. Mabel says that I have the look of a "sexy businesswoman," which makes me blush profusely. She herself is dressed up like a goddess, in a gold silk blouse and black leggings, her hair up in a tidy bun. She has four or five silver bracelets around her forearm that jangle whenever she moves it.

Even Wendy, whose wardrobe has a monopoly on flannel, is wearing an emerald green sundress. My jaw drops to the sidewalk - she's more gorgeous than I've ever seen her. I'm about to step into the back seat of her van when she says, "you can stop looking at me like that." She wraps her arms around my neck and whispers into my ear, "I'm still only interested in men."

I linger in a cloud of surprisingly girly perfume for a second - no trace of cigarette smoke - and push her in the chest. "You're a tease and I hate you."

Mabel rides shotgun, so from the center back seat I can admire her outfit without her noticing. I can only really see her left cheek, arm, and thigh, but it's enough to make my heart flutter in that irritating way that it does. It isn't a crush, or a revival of my feelings of old, or anything like that. I just appreciate beauty when I see it. Right?

"I'm excited," Wendy says, drumming on the steering wheel at a stoplight. "How long has it been since you came out with me, P?"

"I don't know. Long enough that I'm actually excited about it."

"Are we playing the numbers game tonight?" She turns her head to Mabel. "We used to compete to see who could get the most phone numbers. If I could get five before she could get one, then I won. I always won."

"Apart from the time you didn't realize I'd taken you to a gay bar," I point out.

"Yep. That was demoralizing. And then embarrassing. And *you* ended up texting seven different girls for an entire week."

I relax into the seat and sigh. "That was a good week. But, no, I will not be playing that game tonight. I have since come to realize that it's shallow and immature."

"Loser. What about you, Mabel?"

"I don't think so," Mabel says. "I'm not really planning on meeting anybody tonight. I mean, I'll meet people, obviously, but I don't want to *meet* anyone. It's too soon."

The statement puts me at ease. I've been wondering whether her faith in guys has been brought down a notch after Jason. Since she moved in I've been reading up online about abuse victims and the lasting effects, the PTSD. Tonight, my mission is to keep her away from any touchy-feely or creepy-looking types, without making myself appear clingy. Given that I stole a glance at her butt when we left the apartment earlier, I believe I belong to the category of people I just described,

which lands me in quite the paradox.

None of us really anticipated how long the drive to Portland would take. Wendy said it was "just a couple hours north," but by the third hour into our journey I'm starting to wonder why we didn't wait until we got to Nina's apartment before we got changed. I can either sweat in the van or roll down the window and fundamentally screw up my hair. I'm especially curious as to why Wendy was wearing so much perfume, unless her game of collecting the most phone numbers begins with the hitchhikers in the various towns along the interstate.

Needless to say, when we arrive at Nina's apartment four hours after our departure, the three of us rush through the overly enthusiastic hellos and pile into her bathroom to freshen up. The floor of the living room is already set up with three sleeping bags and pillows, the furniture spread to the corners of the room. Nina's so excited to have us here that my heart melts; having lived here for only a month, I can't imagine she has spent much time with her own friends. Kyle, her boyfriend, is out of the apartment all night playing poker, so he won't have to deal with the overwhelming femininity.

The apartment building is a short distance from downtown Portland, so we walk a couple of blocks to an Italian restaurant for dinner and eat under an awning outside, as the sun sets at the bottom of the street between two skyscrapers. An endless stream of men and women pass our table along the sidewalk, in lively groups, heading into a night of their own, their pleasant aromas fending off petrol fumes from the road.

I sit with one leg over the other and shake my foot for the duration of the meal, bottled water not doing a whole lot to calm the nerves. There isn't much room under the table, either, so a couple of times my foot brushes Mabel's leg and I look up to apologize but she looks away, which might sound odd, but things have been just like that - like we're working our way back to being close friends but we haven't made it yet. She knows now, all the things I thought about her in the years she was gone. Everything's out in the open, the ugly truths, and while ultimately it feels healthy, it's also laid out on the table between us and keeping us from how we used to be.

The night club we wind up at is much more laidback than I was expecting, which I'm silently thankful for. There's no line to get in but it's relatively busy inside. There's an open spot at the bar, which lines the left wall almost all the way to the back, the right-hand side is lined with booths and soft stools to sit on, way at the back there's a smattering of high tables, and the center of the room is a dance floor. Everything is purple. Like, everything - purple furniture, purple walls, purple light swallowing the bar and the wooden floor.

Wendy leads the way to the gap in the bar-obstructors and orders some kind of cocktail that I don't catch the name of over the music. She buys all of us a drink; I'm the last in line and ask for a Diet Coke. I notice Nina and Wendy staring like they anticipated me fucking up and ordering a Martini.

We stand around one of the tall tables and spend half our time catching up with Nina, and the other half scoping out the club. Nina has been applying for part-time jobs but spending most of her time writing poems again. She's become a lot more active on her blog and gained an influx of followers, which I already knew because I'm a die-hard follower myself, but I can't keep the grin off my face - some time off work seems to have done wonders for her mood. With her first cocktail out of the way, Wendy informs us that she *must* dance right away, and disappears into the throng of people, failing to drag Mabel along with her. I hate to admit it, but I feel myself relax more now that she's out of sight - out of everybody here she's the most likely to raise two middle fingers to Alcoholics Anonymous and force a drink down my throat.

Everything is so, so normal, until I spot Katie Heywood, my short-lived golf-course kissing-partner

from the spring before I graduated high school. She's sitting in a booth near the entrance - Wendy's giant head must have been blocking her from view. I think I'm imagining things at first; since I told Mabel about the girl two weeks ago during the disclosure of my late teenage years, she's popped into my mind a few times. It's plausible that I've mistaken the girl I'm staring at for the face so fresh in my mind, but no, I'm *certain* it's her. Her bangs are cut to the same length they always were, and while she listens to her friends she keeps smiling in that way I always liked, lifting one eyebrow like she can't believe what she's hearing. The only difference is the lack of a beanie.

And just to confirm everything, she catches my eye from across the room and double-takes, then breaks into a wider smile. I think I look away first, my heart thrumming. How many more old flames does the world want to throw at me this summer? I'm almost terrified to go and talk to her, in case she ends up moving into my apartment.

Katie glances at me twice on the way to the bar, which I suppose is my cue. "Guys, I'm gonna go to the bar. Think I saw someone I recognize."

Mabel and Nina nod, smile, and go back to their conversation that I wasn't paying a lick of attention to.

I have to bump a couple of shoulders to reach her, and when I do, I just hover over her shoulder with my hand raised, like I'm charging up my social competence. After a few seconds I tap her shoulder and she turns around and bursts into a smile.

"Hey," she says. "I was just going to come over. Can I get you a drink?"

I'm not sure why the first thing to come out of my mouth is, "aren't you a little young to be here?"

"Shh," she says, glancing from side to side. "They don't appear to be IDing. Besides, I'm nineteen. How young did you think I am?"

"Sorry. I guess in my head you're still- *we're* still high-schoolers. Um, I'll have a Diet Coke, please."

While she orders drinks I twiddle my thumbs over the bar, feeling very gauche indeed. What the hell happened to me? I used to be the queen of smooth. It would be soul-destroying to find out that my heyday was fueled entirely by alcohol.

But Katie doesn't seem fazed; when the bartender walks away she turns back to me and runs a hand along my shoulder. "How the heck have you been? You look amazing."

"Thank you, so do you." And she does - the black dress compliments her brown eyes and bangs, the array of freckles on her cheeks is visible, and I don't think I ever saw her wear make-up before. "I've been good, actually. How are you?"

"I'm good. How long has it been? Three years?"

"About that, yeah."

"Man. That's insane. I was literally talking about you a few days ago."

I frown. "You were? With who?"

"I was hanging out with some friends from school. High school." She thanks the bartender and hands me my caffeinated anxiety-juice, then gestures to two stools at the very end of the bar, which we claim as our own. "Um, do you remember Josie Miller and Cheri Hyde?"

I shake my head and sip from the straw.

"We were reminiscing about our high school crushes. Your name came up. Of course I told them you were a little more than a crush, you were... well, actually, I never figured out what we were."

"That's right," I say. "The last time I saw you you were with... um..."

"Allison." She rolls her eyes as if the very name disgusts her. "Yeah, that didn't last long. All I'll say is that falling in love over the internet does *not* mean you'll work out in real life."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago." She takes a sip of her cocktail and shakes her head, her bangs swinging along with it. My lips curl upwards. It's kind of adorable.

"You know what's funny? I was talking about you the other day, too."

"Seriously?"

"Yep. Do you remember, when we first met, I told you about a girl I'd had a thing for, and she abandoned me for a guy?"

"Mhmm, I do. What was her name? Bella?"

"Mabel. Well, I was telling Mabel about you a couple of weeks ago. About our golf cart adventures."

Katie gives a contented smile. "Those were fun, weren't they? I remember it well. So, wait, you're talking to Mabel again?"

I glance over to the table that I ditched, and point out my temporary roommate. "That's her right there."

"Oh. Wait, are you two... together?"

"No. Just friends. She's staying in Gravity Falls for the summer. We weren't really getting along when she got here, but she's been through some difficult stuff, and now she's staying at my apartment. So we've bonded, I guess."

Katie nods, sips her drink, and says, "so you're not seeing anybody, then?"

I feel a devious grin take over my face. I don't remember her being so confident. "Nope. You?"

She smiles and gives a subtle shake of her head, holding my gaze all the while.

The purple lighting gets dimmer as the night flies by, the only purpose of which seems to be for couples to disappear into pockets of darkness and get a little more tactile with one another. I didn't plan on talking to Katie until midnight, but it happens anyway - the first time I glanced back to Mabel and Nina, they had been joined by a pair of guys, and the shorter one with glasses was making Mabel laugh a lot, and I didn't care to find out what was so funny. About a half hour later the table was vacant, and while Katie went to the bathroom I bobbed my head around scanning the room only to find Mabel and Nina dancing with the guys from before. My heart sank at the sight and I can't place why. I felt irrational anger bubbling inside me, either at the guy for taking such an interest in Mabel, or at Mabel appearing to enjoy it. If I were in her shoes I couldn't imagine wanting to *look* at a man for at least a few months, but maybe that's my inner-lesbian talking.

Katie is a wonderful distraction, however. She tells me that she's studying Economics at the University of Portland, having just finished her freshman year. She's living at home for the summer, and staying with some of her college friends this weekend, so it's a wild coincidence that I ran into her in the city instead of Gravity Falls. With every passing second I remember one more thing that I liked about her, and my heart beats a little faster, and my mind keeps wandering to where this reunion might lead.

But the fantasy is interrupted when, over Katie's shoulder, I see Mabel emerge from the crowd and hurry outside the club. Nobody follows her or appears to notice. I touch Katie's shoulder, interrupting her sentence, and tell her I'll be right back.

She's facing away from me, leaning against the brick wall of the neighboring building, highlighted by both a streetlamp and the purple neon from the club's sign. The air is still warm and sticky, but pleasant against my bare arms.

"Hey," I call out, pacing up to her. She spins around but relaxes at the sight of me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she says, her tone betraying her. "Sorry, I just needed some air."

"Did something happen?"

"No. Yes. I was- there was a guy, Seth, he was really nice, but he..."

Oh, *god*. Did it actually happen? Exactly what I was afraid of? While I was busy flirting my ass off? "What did he do?"

"Nothing. Nothing bad, just, he asked me if I wanted to dance, and I said yes, but when he put his hands around my waist I could hear Jason screaming in my head. I saw, like, I *saw* him in my mind. It was- it freaked me out so bad."

Her words stammer out in bullets and I want so badly to reach out and comfort her, but I force my hands to keep to themselves. "It's okay. He can't hurt you anymore," I say, though it sounds facile out loud.

"I know. God, that was weird. Sorry, you can go back inside if you want." With a sheepish grin, she adds, "looked like you were getting somewhere with that girl you were talking to."

Curse my transparency. "Yeah- um, maybe. Are you sure you're okay?"

She nods and smiles, and it's convincing, but leaving her out here doesn't feel at all noble.

"Let's just go back to Nina's," I say.

"What? No, I don't want to ruin everybody else's night."

"Then we'll go back. Just you and me."

"But-"

"I didn't want to come here in the first place. I mean, I was down for coming to Portland, and seeing Nina, but to be completely honest, it took a long fucking time to get up here, and I released a lot of sweat into the atmosphere along the way, and I woke up pretty early this morning so I don't know about you, but the best thing for me right now would be a good night's sleep."

She stares at me for a second then laughs, looks down at her shoes. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay. I'm gonna go find Nina and Wendy and tell them that we're leaving, okay?"

Katie is in the same spot at the bar, which is both endearing and upsetting. I tell her that I need to go and assure her that everything is okay. She's incredibly cool about my immediate prioritization of Mabel over her. We stare at each other for a moment before the words roll out of my mouth. "I'd love to see you again."

She breaks into a grin, and in a move that drives a flurry of excitement through my body, she hooks a finger through a belt loop on my skirt and pulls me toward her, thrusting her cell phone into my hands. "Then put your number in my phone."

Nina ends up walking back with us. Wendy almost does, too, after we tell her what happened with Mabel, but we have to practically tear her from the burly dude whose mouth she was attacking to do so, so we convince her to stay in the club and have her fun. When we get back to the apartment Nina changes into pajamas and Mabel and I change into the spare clothes we brought with us. We sit around her kitchen table and eat grapes out of the fruit bowl while Nina drinks bucketfuls of water and encourages Mabel to do the same. Nina will be up five times in the night to pee, she always says, but at least she won't have a headache in the morning. At about one-thirty my head flops over and I jolt awake, after a split second of sleep. "Time for bed," I murmur, and the girls agree.

Nina allows her guests to use the bathroom first; Mabel and I brush our teeth at the sink with heavy eyelids, our elbows lazily bashing against each other. She spits at the same time I reach for the faucet, landing a delightful blob of toothpaste and saliva on the back of my hand. My eyes shoot open and before she can say anything, I wipe my hand on the front of her t-shirt.

"Hey!" she says through incredulous laughter. "This is a new shirt!"

"You *spat* on me!"

"By accident!"

We slip into the sleeping bags in Nina's living room, giggling about nothing in particular. When Nina finishes up in the bathroom she hovers in her bedroom doorway. "Lights out?" she asks us.

I say, "yes please, your highness."

"Yeah, go lie down in your *fancy* bed, with your *fancy* sheets," Mabel teases.

"I have a bad back," Nina says, throwing her hands out. "I need my mattress. It's memory-foam, so it-"

"Boooo," I call out. "Nobody cares about your boring mattress. We get it, you're too good for carpet-peasants like us."

Nina rolls her eyes and flicks off the light. "Goodnight, Mabel. Screw you, Pacifica."

"Goodnight, Nina," Mabel says. "Thank you for everything," she calls through the closed door. "Can she hear me?"

I yawn, mutter out a response, and when the momentary giddiness from the bathroom fully fizzles

away, I fall straight to sleep.

I wake up to a *crunch*.

Then a ruffling sound, like somebody digging into a bag of chips.

Then another *crunch*.

I jab my hand at the floor, feeling for my phone, and when I find it I use the screen to light up the source of the noise: It's Mabel, sitting upright in her sleeping bag, looking down at me like a deer in the headlights. There's a giant bag of M&M's in between her legs, and I'm not talking about a standard, giant bag of M&M's, I mean the really fucking massive ones that you pass on the shelf at Walmart and think, *why the hell would I ever need that quantity of M&M's?*

"You okay there?"

She nods. "Just thinking."

I sit up and face her, fold my legs. I set my phone on the floor and use its flashlight as a dim lamp. "About anything in particular?"

She chews thoughtfully, though I never knew that was a possible emotion to express while chewing. She holds out the bag of candy to me and I shake my head. "About Jason. I want to see him. Is that normal?"

"Probably. You were together for a long time."

"Yeah." She stares at the floor and continues to push candy through her lips like a slot machine.

"Do you want to see him enough to... like, go and visit him in prison?"

"No," she says, her eyebrows dropping. "I don't think so. What would I even say to him?"

"I can think of a few things."

She looks up at me with a sad smile. "Sorry I kinda ruined your night."

"You didn't. I told you I wanted to leave."

"What about the girl you were talking to?"

"I have her number," I say, waggling my eyebrows.

"Well, go you," she says, kicking my foot. "What's her name?"

"It was Katie, actually. The girl I told you about the other night."

"Shut up. The same girl?"

"The same girl. She's staying in Gravity Falls with her parents until college starts up again."

"And you're going on a date?"

"It would seem that way, yeah."

"Well, consider me jealous. She was beautiful," Mabel says, snuggling back into her sleeping bag like that statement meant nothing.

Something swims around in my stomach as I glare down at her. "What, you mean you... found her attractive?"

Her eyes light up with concern. "Sorry, is that weird for you?"

"No, it's fine, but... I didn't realize you were still into girls."

"Oh. Yeah, I am."

I'm fairly sure that this is the fastest my heart has ever beaten at four o'clock in the morning. That admission changes everything. That means my teenage dream of coupling up with Mabel Pines just became an actual, palpable possibility. And that's frightening, because with a fiancé out of the picture and now *this*, there isn't a whole lot stopping me from repeating my old mistakes, except for the thin barricade of that sleeping bag. I blink hard in attempt to cleanse my mind. "Why didn't you tell me? We could have talked about lesbian struggles. Or... bisexual struggles. LGBT struggles."

She pulls the bag up to her chin and grins. "I thought it was kinda obvious."

"That you were bi? How was that obvious? You've been dating a boy for four friggin' years."

"Yes, but do I need to remind you that you and I were quite intimate before that?"

"No, do I need to remind *you* that you told me repeatedly how confused you were about your sexuality and then proceeded to run off with a dude?"

She winces. "I forgot about that part."

"Yeah." I smirk. "So tell me... did you enjoy kissing Wendy?"

She pulls the sleeping bag even further up her face, smothering her grin, twelve years old all over again.

"You did, didn't you? You *bitch*. I've always been curious about her."

"She was good at it, yeah," Mabel says. "But I got a mouthful of smoke. It was like eating a cigarette."

I scrunch up my face, the fantasy suddenly much less appealing. "Where the hell is she, anyway?"

Mabel rolls over, retrieves her phone, and passes it to me. "She sent us that about twenty minutes ago."

have you guys ever rode those mechnaical bull things? thats what this guy is like LOL

"Jesus Christ," I say.

"Excuse me while I fetch up my M&M's."

I pass her phone back and stay sat upright, rocking back and forth. I'm too curious to go back to sleep. "So do you like guys more, or girls?"

"I don't know," she sighs. "I like them both equally. It's about the person, not the parts."

"Yeah but, you must have a preference."

She hunches her shoulders. "Not me."

"Okay, okay, how about this: That guy you were talking to tonight, or Wendy."

Mabel rolls her eyes, but sinks into thought anyway. After a moment she says, "Wendy."

"Okay, the guy you were talking to tonight, or Nina?"

"How's that fair? I don't know Nina well at all."

"So? You don't know the guy at all, either."

"Right, and I know Wendy pretty well, so maybe that's why I picked her."

"Okay, so let's make it fair - think of a boy from back home that you do know well."

She sighs, but I know she loves playing games like this. It's just rare that she's on the receiving end of the interrogation. "Sean," she says.

"Sean, or Wendy?"

"Wendy."

"Sean, or... Naomi?"

"Sean. Definitely."

"Sean or me?"

Her eyes flick to me. I hold perfectly still as the seconds crawl by, waiting for the answer that will either crush me or inflate my ego. "You," she says.

I break out into a smile. "Wendy, or me?"

The flashlight reflects off of her irises. I focus on that. "How is that relevant?"

"It isn't."

Seeing that I refuse to avert my eyes, she answers the question. "You."

A nervous laugh escapes me and Mabel smiles. "I have a date."

"I know."

Something, but nothing in particular, brings me back to reality. I'm not in some dream-like bubble where nothing has consequences, I'm in my friend's apartment, in Portland, on planet Earth, playing shamelessly flirtatious games with a fragile girl who should be totally off-limits. "That's all I needed to know," I say, turning off the light on my phone and settling back into my own bed. "Two to one for girls."

"That doesn't mean anything," she says.

"Sure it does. You prefer women."

"You didn't pick a big enough sample size!"

While at first I'm content with the results of my inquisition, as the silence drones on, eventually replaced by Mabel's sleepy shallow breaths, my mind floats back to that dangerous place - my teenage dream, and how it sounds more feasible now than ever.

I stay awake until the first light of dawn invades the windows of Nina's apartment.

Nineteen

It's Friday, August 7th - a grand total of two weeks and six days since discovering Ford's maze - that I find a solution.

It started when Mabel pinned the map of Scuttlebutt Island to the wall. Or, I should say, it took two weeks of us exhausting our brains on the same idea (that the line through the maze would spell out a message if arranged in a certain way), before I took a step back and really studied the maze alongside the map for the first time. Then, it was as obvious as the zit on my cheek. The maze is also a map. A minimalistic map, made up of only black lines, but a map nonetheless.

I went to the local library, which I hadn't done since the elementary school trip on which I had shut Riley Fielding's face in an encyclopedia and been imprisoned on the bus for an hour. The row of ten computers along the back window was almost full capacity - mostly old people struggling to check their email - but I found a seat and battled the low bandwidth to bring up a few maps of the town. Those were all illustrated, outdated, or devoid of detail, so I zoomed in on Gravity Falls on Google Maps and printed that out. I also printed a map of Piedmont - Mabel's hometown - just in case Ford thought his niece's wild goose chase wasn't quite insane enough.

Another couple hours back at home, spinning the map around on my kitchen counter, and I had it. There was a long, winding route from the Mystery Shack, through a footpath in the woods into town, around back alleys and back roads surrounding Main Street, to the abandoned convenience store just outside of town, quite near the diner, back towards the Interstate. And that route matched the solution to the maze almost perfectly - too closely to be a coincidence, surely.

I realized then that the map I had printed wasn't to scale with the line through the maze, so I jogged back to the library and printed out a few more maps, zooming in each time, until I was able to scribble over a copy of the maze and, through the paper, sketch a faint line on my printed map that perfectly traversed along the paths and streets. It didn't make sense, not one ounce of it, that the route zigzagged around so much, when you could easily get to the store in a third of the distance. But I knew that the abandoned store used to be a popular hangout spot among Wendy and Dipper and their delinquent friends, and it was possible that Mabel had her own memories of the place - not to mention that this answer fit in with the pattern of Ford's trespassing spree.

The satisfaction was so overwhelming that I almost screamed in the middle of the library. Instead, I keeled over the table and quietly pounded it with my fist, which drew some understandably questioning looks as I sauntered outside.

That brings us up to now. Mabel is already off work. She texted me to ask why I wasn't home and the copy of the maze was missing.

When I get home, she spins around, tosses her hair back, puts her hands on her hips and in her blue uniform she reminds me so much of Lindsay it's terrifying.

"Have you been playing detective without me?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, because I know she isn't actually mad.

And to prove it, her features relax. "You're sweet."

"If you think I'm sweet now, wait 'til you see this." I hustle my butt to the kitchen counter and spread out the stack of papers I cradled on my way back from the library.

I point to both the maze and the printout with the route traced through, and after a few seconds Mabel murmurs, "holy shit." Another moment passes. Her eyes dart back and forth between the pages. She tucks her hair behind her ear and her hand hovers there, concentration having seized her movement. "Oh my god, Pacifica. This is it."

"I think so, yeah. I was using the theater as a starting point, trying to draw a route from there that matched the line through the maze. But then I tried using the Shack as the starting point and I got that right away."

"This is the haunted convenience store I went to with Wendy, ages ago." She sets the papers down on the counter and laughs to herself. "We met an elderly couple there. Well, I say 'met', but they were ghosts. Dipper had to put on a lamb costume and do a little dance."

"...What?"

"I told Ford all about that once. He got me a box of this imported candy for my birthday, it was called Smile Dip. Ugh. That stuff used to make me *crazy*. The last time I'd had it was here, at this store. I bet that's where I'm supposed to go." She pulls me into a hug. "You found it. Thank you."

"Well, slow down. I don't know if that's definitely the answer. Look here - the route goes along Main Street, up to this house on a hill, then down the other side. It all lines up with the line through the maze, but it's so... random. Why would you have to walk all that way if the solution was to just go to the convenience store?"

She shakes her head and frowns down at the map. "Maybe it's like that to throw us off? If the route was just along the highway it'd be almost a straight line from here to the store. It would be too obvious."

"Maybe. This was hard enough already, though. It took us three frickin' weeks working on it together. You really think he'd make it harder for no real reason?"

"Only one way to find out, right?" She sweeps the paper into a stack and hugs them to her chest. "Let's go."

The clock on the microwave, however, reads 4:49 P.M. "My dinner reservation's at six-thirty. I'm not gonna have enough time."

Mabel stops on the way to her bedroom and turns around. "Oh. That's right. I forgot."

That is right - my date with Katie is tonight. And if you had any doubt over whether it's a real date or a friendly catch-up, all you'd have to is read any of our text messages from last Saturday. The girl has gotten a lot bolder since high school, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it. Her flirtatious non-sequiturs and winking emojis have had me blushing at work all week.

Still, Mabel's quest feels more important, if not simply for the fact that we've finally broken free from the circle we've been running in. I say, "I could cancel?"

"No, don't be silly. You've been looking forward to that all week. No, you have to go. I'll do this one by myself."

I hesitate. "You can't wait until tomorrow?"

She hesitates. A whole lot of hesitation in this room. "I mean, I don't know how much further there is to go. I only have about three weeks until I'm back home."

Three weeks. That's right. Time really is bleeding away. "Okay. I guess we can catch up in the morning, then?"

"Of course." She smiles. "I'm sure I'll need your brains for the next clue. If I find it." I nod and she steps into the guest room, shutting the door behind her.

I shower away the grime from running between the library and my apartment all day, then root through my closet for something first-date appropriate. Katie loved my blue floral shirt when we met in the club, unless she was just being polite, so tonight I dig out a green sleeveless dress with a similar floral pattern. I think I last wore it at my mom's friend's wedding about two years back. It fits tightly around my hips, so I'm trading comfort for seduction. I step over to the mirror. Scratch that - I'm trading the *ability to walk* for seduction. Whatever. I'll just leave earlier, give myself plenty of time to hobble to the restaurant.

When I've finished my make-up I open my bedroom door and Mabel's still here, lying back on the couch in a black hoodie. She looks up from her phone and makes a surprisingly fluent growling noise. "Hottie alert."

"Shut up," I say, hiding a grin. "What are you still doing here?"

"I'm gonna time it so I get to the convenience store after dark. Then I can glide through the shadows, like a panther." Another growl. "Seriously though, you look really nice."

"Thank you," I say, perching on a stool at the kitchen counter.

"Are you nervous?"

"A little. It's been a while since I went on a date with anyone."

"But you were dating this girl before, right? You can skip some of the awkward stuff."

"I guess so. We were never really dating, though. We made out and flirted a lot, never went further than that. Maybe that's all it will be this time too."

"Hm." Mabel sits up and silence shrouds the room. "Have you ever thought about curling your hair?"

I shake my head.

"I think it would look really pretty. I mean, your hair's fantastic already, but I think you should try it."

"I wouldn't know how to."

"I'll help you. I have my curling iron here. I was gonna use it when we went to Portland but I forgot."

I hadn't ever considered it - my mom used to straighten my hair when I was younger and nowadays it stays straight on its own. It's the only straight part of me left. I guess it's ingrained in my head that perfectly straight locks are an irreplaceable part of my spruce appearance. But when Mabel tells me to open my eyes, and I see in the bathroom mirror what a curling iron can do, my jaw drops.

"Oh god," I blurt out.

"What? You don't like it?"

"No, I do. It's... wow. I look like a totally different person. In a good way."

Mabel grins. "It's a little more subtle than I usually do it. More wavy than curly."

"It's great," I tell her, standing from the stool and admiring the full picture. A burst of confidence strikes me. "It even draws attention away from this awful fucking zit on my cheek."

"Yeah, do you want me to squeeze that?" she asks, raising her talon-like fingernails and pinching them together.

I gently push her hand away. "I'm good."

Katie wears a shoulder-less red top and skinny black pants, her chocolate hair held back by a barrette, and a gold crescent-shaped necklace that acts as a nice excuse to glance at her cleavage. She stands and waves at me when I enter the restaurant, an upmarket Italian place on Main Street that my mom has been obsessed with since it opened last year. (Thankfully she doesn't eat here on Fridays - "too much riffraff.")

We both order soup to start, a tomato-based red liquid riddled with some very crunchy green bits that are overwhelmingly bitter. It's a five-star establishment and Katie seems fine, so I don't question it.

Usually I'd order the spicy pizza that comes loaded with pepperoni and chillies and grease oozing out of the center, but tonight I go for the lighter ring-shaped pizza, on a thin base, with a truckload of salad piled up in the middle. Katie goes full-salad. And when the waiter asks if we'd like to see a dessert menu, we both shake our heads.

Soup, salad, no dessert. In my limited experience of dating, that's code for... *let's get out of here with our appetites intact and get down to what really matters*. I shiver in anticipation. Or because they sat us underneath the AC unit.

The conversation all night has been plain, but not awkward. In between bites we reminisced, gossiped about our old school friends and foes. Neither one of us have said anything remotely provocative toward the other, which doesn't follow the pattern of our texts at all. We're either less confident in person, or more civilized. There have only been polite compliments of our outfits. She loves what I've done with my hair, though I wasn't able to tell her it was Mabel's work. The words just didn't roll out. I don't know why.

But while we wait for the check, Katie is on her second glass of white wine and loosening up more than I'm able to with my water and complimentary lemon wedge. "It's early," she says, leaning forward slightly and resting her chin on her hands.

Nerves aflutter, I only manage to spew out, "the service was fast." Great. I should be home writing Yelp reviews, not out looking for love.

"Have you got any plans tonight?"

I think of Mabel. I think of her meandering through the nearby streets on her own. But I'm looking at Katie, and she's gorgeous and she smells nice and for whatever reason her attraction to me hasn't wavered an inch since high school. "No," I say.

"My parents are away for the weekend," she says. "If you wanted to come over."

I smile faintly. "I'd love to."

Katie and I split the check fifty-fifty, but by the time we've walked to her house, I'm thinking of asking for a reimbursement. She lives on the northern end of town, which is enough to know that somebody in her family has a whopping paycheck. Out in the woods is an arrangement of mansions, spaced apart and secluded by pine trees. I now know that one of these belongs to Katie. I stop in the gravel driveway, gaze up to the row of nine windows on the third story, grin, and shake my head. Memories of my former life whizz through my mind, similar to when I saw Northwest Manor with Mabel.

"Crazy," I say in the entryway, taking off my shoes. "I used to drive by this place all the time. Some of my parents' friends lived in the house at the end of the road."

"The Ambersons?"

"No, I don't think so. Began with 'J'. Maybe they moved."

I follow her into the kitchen, which might just be the size of my apartment. Through the door, there's a dining table on the left with ten chairs, some sort of reading corner on the right with two bookshelves, a leather couch, and a small chandelier dangling above. The back half is actually what you'd expect of a kitchen. Katie flicks on the row of spot lamps over the island counter and walks over to the refrigerator.

"Do you want something to drink?" she asks.

"I'm okay," I say, standing at the counter and glancing around the dimly lit room. "Thank you." Raindrops begin to patter on the tall window over the sink. Again I think of Mabel. It's only 8:15 P.M., the sun hasn't set - she may not have even left yet.

"What's wrong?"

I snap my head to my right and Katie is pouring water from a glass bottle. "Nothing," I say. "Your house is beautiful."

"My dad was an investment banker. Plus the golf club brings in a lot of money."

My lips part. "Was?"

"Yeah, as in, he's retired. He isn't dead or anything." Her eyes widen and a hand flies to her mouth. "Oh, god, I'm so sorry."

"It's fine." I smirk, her embarrassment fueling my courage. I place a hand on her shoulder and walk her back to the door. "Come on, give me the tour."

With every room that we walk into, I long more and more for a drop of alcohol to cloud my feelings. I can't even pinpoint what's wrong with me, but I think it's a paradoxical longing for the wealthy lifestyle that I always hated, mixed in with pity for Mabel, out in the rain. But there's something else too, I realize, when the tour ends in Katie's childhood bedroom and I walk in circles, gazing over her books, her trinkets, the posters on the walls of bands I don't recognize. A guitar in the corner. Sewing machine on a desk. Three games consoles stacked on top of each other.

"Pacifica." Katie steps to the center of her room and touches my forearm. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I clear my throat. "It's just a little... sad? We used to know each other, but we didn't...*know* each other. I didn't know you played guitar, I didn't know you lived here, I didn't know you had a little brother, and triplet baby cousins, I didn't know you liked... Broken Social Scene, whatever that is. Didn't we ever ask each other about our lives?"

Her face shifts to a weak smirk. "I think we were usually too busy with other things."

I look into her eyes. "I just feel like we didn't know each other."

"Well," she says slowly. "We could change that."

It's a tender kiss. Very slow. But it gives way to another, and another, and within what feels like five minutes our hands are struggling to find a comfortable place to land, our clothes no longer serving any purpose other than an obstruction. Her tongue dances on my lips and her fingers tease my body.

And yet... I feel nothing. Miles away from aroused. My body isn't responding.

So, I try to force it. When we maneuver to her bed and I sprawl out on my back, I arch my hips to meet hers. I let her pin back my hands. I let her rub my breasts through the fabric of my dress. And I feel *nothing*.

How unfair is that?

"Katie", I say, breathing into her neck.

She was about to unzip my dress. She pulls back and looks down at me, tucks her bangs behind her ear. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. I don't think I can do this."

"Oh." She pushes herself up with her hands and hovers above me, like she's mid-press-up. Then she clambers off me and sits upright. "I knew there was something wrong. Are you sure you're feeling okay?"

I sit up and she presses her palm to my forehead.

"Do you want me to get you some water?"

"I'm fine, seriously." Her reaction is so endearing that I chuckle. "I'm really sorry. I thought I wanted this, but..."

"But you don't."

"It's not you. I know that sounds like the most cliché thing I could have possibly said, but really, it isn't you."

She nods slowly, with indecipherable eyes. "Is there somebody else?"

The *really* honest answer is *yes*, and *I've been daydreaming of her face all evening*. "I think so."

"Can I ask who it is?"

"It's, um, a friend. I don't know, Katie. It's somebody I really shouldn't be having feelings for."

"Your mom?"

"Okay, *now* I feel sick."

She giggles and leans back against her pillow.

I shake my head. "How are you so cool about this?"

She shrugs. "You were cool when I told you I was going to date Allison. It wouldn't be fair if I got all jealous now that it's the other way round."

I draw circles in the sheets with my fingertip. "The thing is, I don't know if it would work out with me and this girl. It's not very practical. And we have a bit of a history, *and* I don't think either of us are particularly... mentally stable. Like, if I stayed here tonight, with you, in the long run that could be amazing. It would be amazing."

Katie's eyebrows drop. "So I'm the *safe* option in this situation."

"That's not- I didn't mean it like that."

"It's okay," she says, smiling and taking my hand. "It's like I said. We've been through this before. Listen, Pacifica, I really like you, and I think what you said tonight is true, that we never really knew each other. And I want to get to know you more, even if it's just as friends. I think you should follow your gut, tell this girl how you feel. If things don't work out, then... maybe we can have a little talk. If things do work out, I'll be really happy for you."

I wipe away the single tear that falls from my eye. "God, you are way too understanding. Is it weird that I'm almost hoping things won't work out?"

She smiles. "I can be mad at you instead, if you want."

"Yeah, that might help."

Katie leans forward and I don't hesitate to kiss her, for what might be the last time. When we part, she whispers onto my lips, "then get the fuck out of my house."

My face drops.

"Kidding. I'm just kidding."

So, here I am again. Crossing the border from ridiculous to batshit insane, all in the name of my undying love for Mabel Pines. Masochism at its finest. I've traveled interstate to reach her, I've chased her car until I collapsed, and now I'm walking around in the dark, the rain annihilating my hair and plastering the dress to my body.

And I don't have a clue what I'll say to her. Above everything I'm angry, angry that I've let her creep back into my mind whenever my mind should be elsewhere entirely. Angry that I've had so many chances to explore healthy relationships with other girls, and they've all been shattered because the girl isn't Mabel. And I'm angry that after the kissing and the touching and the pulling away and the distance and the sex and the abandoning, the slap in the face, I'm right back at the beginning. Ready to ride the world's most nauseating rollercoaster all over again.

The convenience store stands on its own along the opposite side of the road to the street lights. Until a few years ago the sign out front was illuminated, but now at night it's engulfed in darkness. Several panels of the chain-link fence have been flattened into the ground, giving easy access to

the parking lot, and it turns out that's as far as I need to go.

She's sitting on a salt bin along the side of the building. I don't see her until I'm ten feet away. The rain has stopped now, I notice, but she looks as drenched as I am, and even through the darkness I can see the deep brown of her eyes gazing up at me.

She says, "how did you find me?" From her voice I can tell she has been crying.

"You said you'd be here after dark."

"What happened to your date?"

I shrug. "It ended." She shuffles aside and lets me sit down next to her. "Did you find anything?"

"Yeah." Mabel leans over and picks up a backpack, rifles through it and pulls out a sheet of paper. She hands it to me. "It's the last clue."

I take the damp page and breathe in. The last clue is a handwritten letter.

Mabel,

You will find attached an envelope. Please do not open this until instructed!

We've reached a point of your expedition in which I owe you an apology. Firstly, for the circuitous route you took to get here, and secondly, for the overall seemingly disjointed nature of the treasure trail you've been following. And, I suppose I should offer a third apology, because it has had to come to a premature end.

My doctor informed me this morning that my heart does not have as many beats left in it as he had originally hoped. Admittedly I had been fearing this - I won't go into detail regarding my ailments in the past week, but know that old age isn't always easy!

My aim was to walk you along memory lane. We didn't know each other for as long as I would have liked, my dear, but I clearly failed to recognize how many memories you shared with me in the time that we did have. Countless mornings you were awake before the rest of the town, and you joined me downstairs in the lab to regale me while I worked. Today I happened to recall your visit to this particular spot with Wendy and your brother. I remember you told me that the owners were friendly yet intimidating, and that was exactly how I remembered them, but on the way here I took a detour through town to see what else would jog my memory.

How about the bowling alley where your fingers got stuck in the ball and you hurled yourself down the lane? Or the bar where you beat Dipper at the test-your-strength carnival game? I believe I even found the spot around the back of the old taffy factory where you found the injured sparrow - has he come back to visit recently?

You should know that I devised Stan's instructions first, followed by Dipper's. I left you until last, Mabel, simply because I couldn't think of anything to leave behind that would do your delightful eccentricity any justice. But I have it, now. I'll spare you the abstruse instructions:

There is a clearing in the woods to the north of Gravity Falls, beyond the waterfall, beyond the railway bridge. The coordinates are 42.51394 degrees north, 123.07681 degrees west. Ask your brother if you need help interpreting coordinates, but I'm told that entering them onto the internet can help you pinpoint the location. Go to the clearing on the 15th day of any month, after the sun has fully set. Only then should you open the attached envelope.

Until then,

Ford

I look up and fold the paper.

Mabel says, "he wanted us to come back up and see him. But I was so busy at the school and Dipper was so busy with college, we kept putting it off. Now it's too late." Her eyes well up with fresh tears. "He wanted to see us so he could say goodbye. We couldn't even make the effort to leave for a weekend. It wasn't even that far."

I wrap an arm around her and she hugs my chest. "Shh," I say, over the top of her head. "You didn't know."

The things I thought I wanted or needed to say on the way here feel so insignificant, now. Because Mabel's still here, still alive; there's more time to talk. I think back to my dad and how many things we left unsaid, the weight of carrying those words around with you until finally you explode and your only choice is to confess them to a grave. I hug Mabel a little tighter. Wrapped up in each other's arms, the rain begins to fall on us again.

Twenty

"Shut up," Wendy says over the chatter of the diner.

"Shh," I hiss. "She's right over there."

Wendy leans forward, intense bewilderment on her face. "*Again?*"

"Yes, again. Or they never went away. I don't know."

She peers around the seat of the booth and stares at the subject of our conversation, who is currently making tip-worthy chit-chat with an elderly couple.

"Stop staring," I say. "She'll know we're talking about her."

Wendy turns back to me, expression steadfast. "Well, P, you have to tell her."

My eyes narrow to slits. "In what world would that ever be the case?"

"What do you mean? She's single now."

"Oh, I'm sure she's instantly ready to go out with me, then."

"Maybe not instantly, but she totally would. You *know* there are feelings on her side, too."

"I know that? I don't know that. Do you know that?"

"Well why else has she been sleeping in your apartment for a month?"

"Because we're friends? Because she doesn't want to stay at the Shack, not only because it's lonely and empty, but because it reminds her of her abusive ex-boyfriend?"

"Okay, okay," she says, waving her hand around like a politician. "Then how about this: She tried to kiss you a few weeks ago."

A pause, while I try to discern if I heard her correctly. "*When?* Are you high?"

"In the theater. Remember? I was talking to her about that play she was in, and as soon as you appeared she whipped out her phone and told you to act out a kiss scene with her."

I open my mouth to argue, but nothing comes out. Looking back on it, that was a little out of the blue. I glance up at Mabel now, behind the counter, smiling while she taps on the screen of the cash register. I remember how she looked at me on the stage, fully expecting me to transition smoothly between reading lines and locking lips. I say, "she didn't have any problem with you doing it instead."

"Why would she? That'd be too obvious."

"Okay, smart-ass, if you're so sure that she's into me, why didn't you say anything before?"

"Because last I heard you were pursuing Katie Heywood. I didn't want to make things weird for you."

"You're the *queen* of making things weird for me."

She shrugs. "Not since last time."

The 'last time' she is referring to happened during my last semi-serious relationship, with a girl called Natalie. She hadn't lived here for long before I served her at the diner (in this very booth, actually) and we struck up a romance. After a stream of successful dates we hit up a house party on a Saturday night but unbeknown to us, Wendy, having been drinking all afternoon, stumbled around informing everybody that Natalie was my *sister* visiting from out of state. While Wendy found this hilarious, it did cause a great deal of discomfort when Natalie and I started making out on a couch in plain sight of the entire house, and the host had to interrupt us and say that, while he considered himself to possess a very open mind, we were making certain guests "uncomfortable." We, of course, interpreted this as an unusually direct display of homophobia, and made quite a show of leaving the party by waving our middle fingers at the individuals that were casting us dirty looks, and also by pausing in the doorway to worm our tongues into each other's throats one last time. After Wendy told me what had happened the following morning, I ignored her calls and apology gifts on my doorstep for two months, by which point Natalie and I had grown tired of the amnesiac old woman across the street murmuring "incestuous freaks" whenever we passed by, and we had decided to break up.

"I didn't get anywhere with Katie," I say, tilting my head in Mabel's direction, "because of her."

Wendy takes a long sip of her coffee then sets it down, twists it around in circles with her fingers. "You've got it bad, then."

I look in her eyes and detect the warmth, a far sight away from the drunk Wendy that takes pleasure in ruining my relationships. This one, I feel, I can confide in. "She's great," I spew out, as if I'm afraid that the words will hurt me. "We've had nights lounging around in the apartment where I've felt so peaceful. Like I did with Nina, but... I don't know. There's something more. I just block out everything else in the world, I'm only focused on her. She makes me laugh a lot. And she's beautiful."

A sad smile forms on Wendy's face. "She's also walking over here."

I jump at the hand on my shoulder. "Hey," Mabel says. "More coffee?"

"I'm good," I say, as Wendy holds out her cup. "I should probably get back to work, actually."

"Wait," Wendy says, grasping my wrist more firmly than necessary. Mabel wanders back to the counter, out of earshot. "What are you gonna do?"

"Nothing."

Wendy blinks. "Nothing. You're going to do *nothing*."

"Well what can I do? Even if, for the first time ever, you're right-"

"Rude."

"-and she is into me, it doesn't matter. She's still getting over her ex, for one thing. And in a couple weeks she'll be back in California, and I'll be here, same as it's ever been."

"Come on," Wendy says softly. "You and I both know that California isn't that far away."

I shake my head. "That's not what you said to Dipper."

For a moment I worry that I've overstepped, because she tenses up, but after a second she sits back

in her seat and forces a grin. "Good point."

The gravestones lining the top of the hill silhouette against the sunset, my dad's standing the tallest of all of them. The paved path forks at an oak tree and instead of going left up the hill, I continue to the right, Mabel alongside me. She wanted to see Ford before we headed north into the woods, to read his last letter and find whatever it is he has left behind.

The engraving on his tombstone is generic, only including his name, birth year, and year of death. He didn't leave behind any instructions, except for "no funeral" and the riddles for his family. Plus, Mabel says, the engraving was charged per word, and Stan refused to entertain such a pay plan.

Mabel picks the wilting flowers out of the plant pot and I pass her the fresh ones that we bought this morning, at the town market. I stand silently beside her for a few moments while she kneels in the grass, her hand on the stone. Then she stands up, smiles at me, and we walk back to the car without a word.

In much the same fashion, we drive back into town for a dangerously greasy dinner at Yumberjacks. I eat slowly, the nervous energy gnawing away at my appetite. We've adventured into the night plenty of times now, but this feels different. This is the last time. Mabel hasn't said a lot since we left the apartment, and her anxiety seems to have carried over to me. We've had a whole week to speculate over what awaits us in the clearing Ford directed us to, and tonight we get our answers.

"I called Dipper today," Mabel says, snapping my attention away from the window where the dusk is becoming dimmer. She makes a loud noise with her straw indicating that her cup is empty, then sets the cup aside and scowls at it. I push mine across the table and she looks up. "Are you sure?"

I nod. "You were saying?"

"I told Dipper about Jason."

"Oh. I thought you were going to wait until you were back home?"

"I was. But I needed to... vent, earlier, and I picked up the phone to call him and he knew there was something wrong right away. I couldn't lie to him."

I frown and fiddle with a napkin. "What was bothering you earlier?"

"I was thinking about Jason again. I'm trying not to, because it only ever hurts, but sometimes I can't control it. I think I just needed a familiar voice."

"You know you can talk to me about it, too. Seriously, even if you have to wake me up. I want to listen. I want to help."

"I know," she says lightly, covering my hands with hers across the table. My heart surges to life and my muscles tense up, while she rubs her thumbs along my fingers, completely unaware of the effect. "And I really appreciate that. You've been really great and I have no idea what I would have done if you weren't here this summer. Sometimes, though, I need my brother. More twin quirks."

I swallow discomfort and nod in understanding. "Of course." She picks up my hands, squeezes them, then goes back to my cup. "How did he react?"

"He freaked out. He wanted to drive up here and see me right away, but I got him to calm down. I told him I was staying with you, that you and Lindsay had really helped me get through the shock and the trauma. Then he got mad that I hadn't told him sooner, then he apologized for getting mad, then he got mad at *himself* for getting mad in the first place. It was very emotional."

"He always was."

Mabel smirks but it quickly fades away. "He's a good guy. Like, a really good guy. Not just because he's my brother. He just is. He would never do anything to hurt a woman. And it really makes me wonder, if I grew up alongside a guy like that my whole life, how did I convince myself that what Jason was doing was okay? How did I accept that as normal?"

"Because you loved him. Love can make you blind to a lot of things."

"Yeah." She chuckles humorlessly. "Tell me about it."

"At least you're able to recognize it now as an awful, awful thing. You're able to sit here and talk about it because he doesn't have that leverage over you anymore. That's a huge step. And it speaks to your strength."

She looks up with something akin to wonder in her eyes. That look alone I'd fall in love with, any day of the week. "Thank you," she says.

"What did Dipper say after he calmed down?"

"He wanted me to come home as soon as I'm finished with Ford. But I'm going to stay here for the next two weeks anyway. Then when I'm home we'll talk properly. He reluctantly promised to keep this from my parents, too, until I'm back home. No doubt they'd drive up here and cause havoc if they knew now. Probably visit Jason in jail and throw things at him."

"That sounds awesome."

"Yeah, right? I doubt it's legal, though." Mabel turns to look out the window, and I follow suit.

"You think it's dark enough yet?"

Cars pass with their headlights on, their colors barely distinguishable. "It will be by the time we get to the woods, yeah."

She inhales deeply and looks back at me. "Then shall we go?"

"Let's do it."

My foot slips, and I clamp my eyes shut because I know my arms aren't going to move quick enough to protect me from the fallen tree that's about to smack my forehead. Years of facial care, wasted. But what I fall into is soft and warm, and after a second of questioning whether I'm dead, I steady myself and look up into Mabel's eyes.

"Careful," she says softly, sweeping hair out of my eyes. The beam of her flashlight points up at her chin.

"Shit," I gasp, steadying myself and taking a step back. "How'd you do that?"

She shrugs. "Cheerleading. I had to catch a lot of ladies."

I notice that I'm still gripping her arms like a harness on a rollercoaster. I let go and blush in the darkness. "Thank you," I murmur, stepping around her and continuing along the overgrown trail.

It's been forty-five minutes since we parked on the furthest point north in the affluent residential area, which was difficult, because the territorial snobs that live there don't take kindly to anybody parking within a stone's throw of their driveway. One woman chased us away with a broom.

We've just crossed the second river, meaning that if the satellite photo we printed out is accurate, we're almost at the clearing. The signal strength on our phones is spotty, but they last updated our position five minutes ago, and we're still following the dotted line on Google Maps, despite the trail sometimes splitting off in two directions, neither of which appear traversable. I've had to brush a hedge's worth of leaves out of my hair from crawling under branches and my socks are wet from crossing streams. Every few seconds I have to stop to swipe mosquitoes away from my face. Mabel, on the other hand, takes it all in stride, like some natural-born wilderness warrior.

It happens abruptly. And when it does happen, my first thought is *aliens*. *We are being abducted by aliens*. Without even realizing, we've reached a break in the forest, and as soon as we cross that boundary from bracken to flat, open grass, the floor is awash with rippling waves of red, green, and blue light. I freeze in my tracks, and Mabel stops right at my side. It's like walking into a silent, lifeless nightclub. She makes a noise - trying to say "what?" and not quite getting the whole word out. Our heads drift to the sky in unison and it's the same up there; every inch of visible sky is lit up, in no particular pattern, with one of the three mesmerizing colors, obscuring the stars and flooding our vision. I'm surprised to find that I don't need to squint, the light gentle enough on my eyes despite having existed in a tunnel of black for an hour. I don't know how long it takes for reality to catch up with me, but I glance over at Mabel and watch the light dance across her face, her hair, I watch as a minuscule version of the same display takes place in her eyes.

She glances down at me, her mouth ajar, silently asking me the questions I don't know the answers to, the most prominent being *is this real?*

I take a step back towards the woods, then another, and another, and then freeze up again because the lights vanish. I blink my eyes furiously as they adjust again to the circular clearing, but now it's only painted in pale moonlight. My gut sinks, worried that we've lost it, that the moment is over, but then I see the colors swirling over Mabel's head, her neck craned upwards, as if the lights are still there, I can just no longer see them.

"Mabel," I say. "Come stand here."

She does, and I watch her face as she goes through the same mental process I just did. "Oh," is all she says. A disappointed child on Christmas morning. She paces slowly forwards. I follow. And at the threshold of the woods, we're greeted by the warm embrace of the light show again. "It's incredible," she says now, her voice inflecting at the end, the shock giving way to unadulterated excitement.

I take her hand and guide her further into the clearing, stepping over rocks that turn from blue to green to blue to red to green, and in the approximate center our hands detach and we both twirl on our feet, gazing up at the tips of the pine trees, the same colors on all sides of the circle. Without meaning to I laugh, the most innocent joy that I've ever felt blossoming within me. "This is it," I say. "This is what Ford wanted you to see." I take two steps over to Mabel and pick up her forearms. She looks down at me and I wipe away the tears brimming in her eyes. "The letter," I say.

She reaches into her back pocket and pulls out the envelope. With trembling hands she opens it and pulls out a sheet of lined paper, unfolds that. I move around to her side so I can read over her

shoulder, but Mabel clears her throat and begins to read it aloud, the text adequately visible under the natural light.

"Dear Mabel,

"I have but one instruction left: Look up! What you're witnessing is an entirely undocumented (to my knowledge) natural phenomenon that can most closely be equated to an aurora; we'll refer to it as an aurora for the sake of simplicity, no matter how unjust that feels considering that these bands of light are ten times more intense than that of the Aurora Borealis. I have yet to witness this on any day of the month other than the 15th, suggesting that whatever causes the phenomenon has a coincidental or conscious awareness of the Gregorian calendar, which is very odd. It is only visible at night, from sundown into the early A.M., and perhaps the most peculiar aspect of all: It is only visible from the confines of this clearing. Stepping as far as an inch outside of said clearing conceals the lights from view.

"Now, if your curiosity overwhelms you, you can find my extensive notes on the aurora in my laboratory - should my brother not meddle with said laboratory - filed under A for 'Aurora Mysterialis.' But this letter should not focus on the aurora itself.

"Mabel, in my years studying the oddities of Gravity Falls, I've stumbled upon so many horrors that you'd think my mental health would have taken a bigger hit than it did, things so dangerous that it's a miracle I'm still alive to write you this letter. And yet every once in a while I have been graced with something beautiful, something that shows no trace of any underlying menace, something that makes the grueling process of documenting the supernatural all seem worthwhile. And when I remembered this aurora, my dear, it dawned on me that often times that something-"

Mabel's words turn to a sob, and she covers her mouth with her palm. I'm quick to wrap an arm around her shoulder and lean my head against hers, rubbing her bicep absently.

"It dawned on me that often times that something was you. You were the break that I needed from the darkness. Whether you were spinning on my chair in the lab telling me about your plans for the day, or you were helping me with dinner, or you were providing commentary over the news reporters on the TV (I can't remember the name of the little man with the mustache! You used to do such a good impression of him), you provided an infinite source of optimism in my sometimes bleak life. You're the kind of person that wears a smile on their face through the hardest of times for the sake of those around you. You're the kind of person that can make friends with anyone, even an old hermit struggling to keep up with the modern world.

"So I leave you with this aurora, the most reliable source of happiness in my life - before you came along. I can only hope that the effort you've invested in following this trail has been made somewhat worth it. Trust me when I say that you have a very, very bright future ahead of you, Mabel, because I know that you'll refuse to settle for less. I'm sorry that I won't be there to witness it.

"With love, and awe, and respect, and a conglomeration of other sentiments that I would not be able to fit on this page,

Uncle Ford."

Twenty-One

Mabel's last day at the diner falls on Wednesday, August 26. Even though she worked there for less than two months, Lindsay is as emotional during the departure as she always is with her employees. She hugs Mabel, she cries, she makes Mabel promise to come back and visit an unreasonable number of times per year. It's fair enough - I've caught snippets of the conversations they've been having in the back office about Jason. They really seem to have bonded over the situation, and while it has crossed my mind that Lindsay may once have been a victim of abuse herself, I don't think that's the case. I think she simply has an innate mastery of caring for those who are in pain.

On Thursday, I go with Mabel to the Mystery Shack to gather up the last of her belongings that she didn't move into my apartment. Later on that day, we drive back again to greet Jason's parents, which might be one of the most bizarre interactions I've ever witnessed. I was terrified to meet them, assuming that the couple to raise such a monster would be at least a tad monstrous themselves, but as soon as they get out of their car and Mabel approaches them, the mother wraps her up in a tight hug and begins to sob into her shoulder. The dad's hug is briefer, but still sincere. I watch from the porch of the Shack, out of earshot, as Mabel converses with them, and they nod, and frown, and shake their heads, and by the end of the day I'm convinced that they're dismayed by their son's behavior. We all load their car up with Jason's things and they don't mention his name once, while they talk to Mabel like a daughter.

I guess it doesn't require a bad influence to become a villain; some people go down that path all on their own. I'm glad that one of them is at least somewhat paying the consequences.

When Jason's parents take off back to California I sit on the porch again and let Mabel have her long goodbye in private, because no matter how many times they promise each other to stay in touch, is that really a realistic option? Mabel stands in the driveway for a moment after they're gone, the noise of their engine eventually fading behind the chatter of birds and the pines rustling in the breeze. She turns and walks up to the porch, toned arms and legs on show, in a tank top and denim short-shorts. She sits down and hugs me from the side. I wrap my arms around her and we waste away the afternoon, our legs dangling off the porch and catching the sun, silently coexisting in the way that we do.

On Friday I come home to a spotless apartment once again. Mabel emerges from her bedroom to greet me. "Hey, you."

"Hey. Have you been packing?"

"Nah, I'll do all that tomorrow. I just thought I'd clean the place before I leave. Now, sit down."

"Excuse me?"

"Sit down."

I plop myself down on the couch. "Why am I sitting?"

She stands in the center of the room holding her hands together.

"Oh god," I say. "What are you doing? You're gonna say something serious, aren't you?"

"Pacifica."

"No, don't start with my name! Now I know you're definitely gonna say something serious."

"Will you be quiet?"

"Okay."

"Pacifica. It isn't fair that you let me stay in your home, and eat your food, and sleep in your clothes."

"I didn't know about that third-"

"It isn't fair that you've been such an incredible, wonderful, caring friend despite what I've put you through in the past. I can never, ever repay you for what you've done for me this summer, but I at least wanted to thank you somehow. So I got you a present." Mabel wanders back to her room, her socks silent on the carpet. She shuts the door behind her, and I don't think much of it until I hear her talking to someone.

There's somebody in there. In that room. I straighten my posture and brush my skirt. Who would she have brought here to surprise me? It must be a woman, right? She's gifting me with a woman because I talk about them so much. A prostitute, though?

While I'm trying to decide whether I'd have sex with a prostitute at four o'clock in the afternoon paid for by the girl I'm in love with, Mabel emerges from the room cradling a little Shiba Inu puppy in her arms - which makes even less sense than my original conclusion. She stands over the couch and sings, "meet your new best friend," her tone wavering at the shock on my face. "Oh my god, you hate him."

"I- what? You got me a *dog*?" I extend my arms to hold him and Mabel sets him down, my palms holding him up by the belly. I don't move, totally unsure what to do, while my 'new best friend' pants happily and looks around the room, clueless as to where he is but clearly enjoying it.

"I thought with me leaving you might want a new companion, and I remembered how you always used to say you wanted a puppy but your parents wouldn't let you have one."

I look up at her, dumbfounded. "I've never said that to you before in my life."

Mabel's eyebrows drop. "Shit, am I thinking of someone else?"

The puppy yips and squirms in my hands. I lower him onto my chest and he sniffs my chin for a while, before deciding to lick it.

"We'll take him back," Mabel says. "I still have all the paperwork and the breeder's only-"

"No, don't take him back," I say, and an involuntary laugh pops out when the dog tilts his head at me. "He's adorable."

Mabel's whole body appears to sink in relief. "So you like him?"

"I *love* him," I say, squeezing his cheeks and giggling when he goes on panting, totally unfazed. "I just can't believe that you bought me a dog. I mean, you bought me a dog! And he's so cute, look at his little face." I stand up, cradling the pup how I saw Mabel do it, and kiss Mabel on the cheek.

"Thank you."

"No, thank you. It's like I said, I don't know what I would have done without you this past month."

The puppy wrestles against my arms again and I set him down on the floor. He immediately begins to survey the room with his butt held high like he owns the place.

"I got him some stuff - there's a little cage for taking him to the vet, about a week's worth of food and treats, and some chew toys. All in my room. Oh, also some cleaning products for when he inevitably poops on the carpet."

"Oh, fantastic."

"Yeah, it happens. And I realize all of this might be a little overwhelming, so I will vow to you right now that I'll be up here every few weekends to give you a hand."

I chuckle dryly. "Yeah, right."

"What? I will."

"Yeah, that's what Nina said, and she hasn't come to visit me *once*."

She pinches my ear. "Nina has a boyfriend to look after. I'm a free woman."

Mabel watches the dog sniff at every inch of my apartment, unaware that I'm watching her. She has no idea how many butterflies are throwing up in my stomach at the thought of being able to see her every few weeks. That would *almost* make it... possible. Almost.

"What are you gonna name him?" she says, beaming at me.

I don't know where the thought comes from but I say, "Spark."

"Spark. Any reason?"

I shake my head, honestly clueless as to where the name came from. "Nope. He just looks like a Spark."

That night we eat fajitas at the kitchen counter while Spark gnaws on a colorful rope, very content on his couch cushion of choice.

"I have one tiny proposal for you," Mabel says, and takes a sip of water.

"Oh god."

"Why do you keep saying that?!"

"Because! You do crazy impulsive things, like buying me a fifteen-year commitment in the form of a ball of fluff."

Spark yaps loudly.

"That was him agreeing with me," I say.

"This next thing isn't impulsive," Mabel assures me. "It's just an idea."

"Shoot."

"How would you feel about staying with me in Cali this weekend?"

How would I feel about being with her for another two days before she disappears until an indeterminate date? It's a no-brainer, really. But I have to play it cool. "You mean stay at your house?"

"Yeah. Well, we'd stay there on Sunday night, then on Monday after the party I thought we could go up to Sacramento and stay in my dorm room. My roommate won't move in for another week or so. I can show you around campus."

I finish a mouthful of chicken and smile. "Sounds good."

I drop Spark off at my mom's house on Sunday, without any forewarning. It was a last minute decision; I had my bag packed to stay at Mabel's and then realized *oh, I have a dog now*. My mom was predictably dramatic when I showed up on her doorstep, but Spark made friends with Toby the kitten right away and she seemed to loosen up after that.

My guest room is empty again, but I have a two-night vacation in California to keep my mind away from the impending loneliness. Sure, I have Spark now, but Spark won't let me put my feet in his lap when I need to stretch my legs. He won't wake me up with the smell of French toast. And he won't strut around the apartment with a towel wrapped around him and drive my hormones wild, like Mabel does. Strangely enough, that's the same reason I'm using to convince myself that her departure is a good thing - I don't know how long I had left before temptation got the better of me.

We make one stop at a gas station on our way down south so I can buy a bottle of water. When I step out of the building into the arid heat, Mabel isn't anywhere in sight, the Jeep parked in the empty lot to the side of the building. Bewildered, I walk to the side of the road and look left and right, but there's nothing but the occasional distant car, appearing to shimmer in the heat. I eventually walk around the back of the gas station to find her peeing on the wall.

She screams.

I turn around sharply and cover my eyes. "Oh my god. What the hell are you doing?!"

"What does it look like I'm doing?!"

"*Why?* Why there? There's a row of bushes right in front of you!"

"There's a drain here, though," she calls out, and sure enough, the reason I can hear the stream so loudly is that it's echoing inside a drain. "The toilets inside are out of order but the guy said I can use this."

"Literally anybody could have walked around the back of the building, Mabel."

"Well, I'm sorry, Little Miss Priss, but desperate times call for desperate measures."

The next thirty minutes of the journey is pretty awkward. We keep the volume loud on the radio until we get off the I-5 to head towards Piedmont, when Mabel turns the dial to the left.

"Did you see my... you know what?" she asks, deadpan.

I turn my head and she raises her eyebrows at me. "Briefly," I say. "Nothing I haven't seen before."

When she next glances across at me there's a huge smirk on her face. "Touché."

Pulling up in her driveway is kind of surreal, like physically stepping into a memory. The exterior of the house hasn't changed one bit - the hedges surrounding the property are immaculately trimmed, the concrete driveway practically gleams white under the sun. I walk around to the patio out front and all the furniture is still the same - the dining table with the glass top, the cushioned bench overlooking San Francisco where Mabel used to take her Skype calls (where the Wi-Fi was so spotty that the image refreshed once every ten seconds).

And Dipper's sitting in it. He sees my shadow and looks to the side, plucks out his earbuds, his eyebrows furrowed. "Oh my god," he says, a grin taking over. "Look who it is. Mabel didn't tell me you were coming." He walks up to me and immediately goes for a hug.

I hold on to him for a long time. It's a strange feeling, that I wasn't expecting. Like I missed him but I didn't realize how much I missed him until he was standing in front of me.

When we pull away he says, "it's been a while. You look great."

"So do you." I reach up to squeeze the toned bicep barely contained by his shirt. "When did *this* happen?"

He laughs and pulls his sleeve down further. "My friend gets me free gym membership."

"You once told me that the only reason people go to the gym is to make up for the lack of a personality."

"C'mon," he says, smirking. "We all said dumb things when we were younger. You used to say that gay people were only fishing for attention."

I'm about to dispute that when Mabel comes around the corner, wheeling a suitcase with a box perched precariously on top. "A little help, little bro?"

"There she is," Dipper laughs, wrapping her up in a similar wordless hug, which lasts a moment longer. Mabel clamps her eyes shut, rests her chin on his shoulder. I get one of those pangs of remorse that I never had a sibling, like how I used to feel when I watched them, before I decided that I would never be as close to any sibling as these two were. I smile; the sentiment still holds true. "How are you doing?" Dipper asks her quietly, still holding her arms.

"I'm okay," she says, her eyes flicking to me like she wants to tell him more but not here, not now. I glance around awkwardly, but there isn't really anywhere I can go, other than over the hedge and down the mountain.

Mabel's room is different. There are boxes and bags lining the far wall, bleeding clothes onto the floor. I'm guessing when she moved here at the start of the summer she didn't bother unpacking, and only brought the essentials and a limited wardrobe with her to Gravity Falls. The bed looks newer, a sleek black wooden frame with black and white sheets. All of her posters have been taken down, leaving chips in the paint.

Her parents get back from the supermarket and welcome me with open arms. Mabel already asked them over the phone if I could stay tonight, though I had to heavily persuade her to do so. She wanted me to be a surprise. What an underwhelming surprise, I thought.

She isn't going to tell them about Jason until I'm back in Oregon, because they would be likely to taint the twins' birthday by asking Mabel how she was feeling every five minutes. I never really understood it when she rolled her eyes at her parents and claimed that they worried too much. Surely it's nice to be worried about?

We eat pizza that night in Mabel's cluttered room, talking about the things we used to do and the people we used to know, riding a wave of nostalgia. Somehow I wind up telling the story about Toby Determined's arrest for stealing a woman's panties at the laundromat, and Mabel laughs so hard that she rushes off to the bathroom with her legs clamped together. Shortly afterwards, Dipper turns to me with no humor in his expression and I feel myself tense.

"Thank you for everything you did for her."

I can't explain why, but I was certain he was going to confront me about slapping his sister four years ago. Inherently unable to accept gratitude for anything, I look at my feet and shrug. It's not like keeping Mabel in my apartment was a selfless act. I needed her as much as she claimed to have needed me.

"Seriously," Dipper says. "I had a freakin' anxiety attack when she told me about... him. I calmed down a lot when she told me she was staying with you." He closes the pizza box and sets it aside, just to give his hands something to do. He rests his chin in them. The drone of a TV commercial filters through the door until he says, "I can't believe she didn't tell me sooner."

"It can be difficult," I say. "To talk about something like that. And I can only imagine it got harder to tell you the longer it went on for."

"Yeah," he says, as if reprimanding himself for suggesting otherwise. "I just... I could have helped. Somebody could have helped."

"I think she's very brave," I say, thinking out loud more than anything. "The way she's handled it all. To stand up in court the day after she left him and testify against him. I didn't see it myself, but Lindsay said she was tough as a rock."

He smiles. "Sounds like I need to meet this Lindsay."

"Yeah, you do." I smirk. "It'd be nice if you stopped to say hi the next time you spend a whole two weeks up there, too."

"I'm really sorry about that. I got so wrapped up with Ford's maps-"

"I know. Mabel already explained it to me."

I sleep on the couch, because no matter how long it's been, I can't forget what began in that bedroom. Mabel is okay with that decision, it seems, until she hesitates in her doorway after saying goodnight. The way her mouth opened and closed keeps me awake for an hour, gazing up at an unfamiliar ceiling.

The next morning I tell the twins that I won't be going to their birthday party. I didn't think that announcement would be such a big deal, but they both look at me like I killed their cat. Their friends from high school are taking them out to lunch and they're going bowling this afternoon, neither of them interested in doing anything wild despite it being their twenty-first. I wouldn't feel comfortable being there, I would feel like I was intruding; down here in California they've lived entirely different lives to the glimpses I saw of them in Oregon, and that includes long-standing friendships that I've never been a part of. If you didn't think I was unsociable before, you probably do now.

I can't tell if Mabel's mad at me when they leave, but I'm taking her out for dinner tonight before we arrive in Sacramento, so I have plenty of opportunity to make up for it. Of course, at home alone with Mabel's parents, I feel just as out-of-place as I would at the birthday bash, so I go for a

walk around the neighborhood and find myself exploring a tiny shopping mall - the kind of barren place where half of the outlets are vacant and you look around wondering which of the desolate stores are fronts for money-laundering. It's shamefully late to be shopping for Mabel's birthday present, but I find something that will at least make her laugh, in a disorderly gift shop owned by an overly bubbly woman who talks too much.

Satisfied that I'm not a total failure of a friend, I take the rest of the afternoon to relax. I find a park and lie down in the grass, lather myself up with sunscreen. Just like the last time I was here, it surprises me how green the landscape is. When I first met the Pines twins and they talked to me about California I would always picture a cabin on a white beach, overlooking a calm ocean, maybe with a couple palm trees out back and a hammock. My dream home. It never seemed to occur to me that the state wasn't just one long beach, and when I'm here, actually, there aren't any obvious differences to Oregon. Maybe Wendy's right; California really isn't that far away.

I wake up to my phone ringing, immediately aware that some caring but ultimately creepy soul has picked me up and moved me into the shade. I sit up and whip my head around and, nope, it's just that the sun has dipped behind a tree. I've been asleep for four hours. I answer the phone and Mabel asks me where I am.

"I don't know," I tell her, while I rifle through my beach bag to make sure everything's still there.

There's a pause on the other end of the line. "Well are you alright?"

"Yeah. I'm at a... park. I dozed off."

I smile at the melodic giggle. "You promised you'd buy me dinner, and it's already 7 P.M."

"Hmm. I said I'd take you to dinner, I didn't say I was paying for it."

She gasps. "I should have known. You always were a bit of a cheapskate."

"Oh, *I'm* the cheapskate? You're the one who's having their birthday dinner at Applebee's."

"What's wrong with Applebee's?"

"I don't know, I just prefer restaurants where the menus aren't sticky."

"We could go somewhere else if you want."

"No, I'm kidding," I say, standing and turning around to figure out which direction I came from earlier this afternoon. "It's your birthday. I will follow you to the end of the Earth and back if that's what you want to do."

"How romantic."

I've only taken two steps towards the road before the tone of her voice makes me freeze. "It wasn't supposed to be romantic," I say.

"No? Hmm. That's a shame."

I glance around at my surroundings with a broad grin on my face. At a loss for what to say, I hastily climb up a grass embankment to the road and spot the mall I was in further down the street. "I'll be back in fifteen minutes. Are you all packed?"

"Eh, I'll do it in a minute."

"Start packing. Now. I'm already hungry."

I hang up, because I know she would have said something like *hungry for what?* with a purr on the last syllable, as a joke, and I'd buckle at the knees because she has no idea what effect she can have on me.

It's 9:45 P.M. by the time we arrive on campus. Mabel parks the Jeep out the front of her dorm building, the campus so lifeless that she doesn't need to compete for a parking space. The building itself doesn't look too impressive until we walk around the front, and I see that it wraps around a neatly kept courtyard in a horseshoe shape, with picnic tables and flowerbeds. We walk along a wide, illuminated concrete path carrying two boxes each of Mabel's things.

"It'll be easier doing this with nobody around", she says, in reference to moving her stuff in. "Two years ago I turned up the day before classes started and I couldn't get down the hall without stepping on somebody's foot."

"That might just be because you have freakishly large feet." Something crushes my toes and I gasp. "Ow!"

"Oops," Mabel sings, walking backwards and smirking.

I set the boxes on the ground and fold my arms. "I guess I'll just leave your stuff here, then."

She barrels onwards towards the door without looking over her shoulder. "I guess you'll be sleeping on the sidewalk tonight, then."

At the end of the path, she slips through a set of glass doors and disappears behind a wall.

"God dammit," I mutter, swallowing my pride and picking up the boxes again.

It takes three trips to the car to unload everything into her room. There are two single beds, but it's far more spacious than any dorm room I've seen before. Mabel tells me that she put aside some money she earned over her internship so that she could afford a more upmarket space to live in for her final year. Even if she hadn't done that, the money she was saving for her wedding would have covered it.

As soon as the last of the boxes is set down on the floor, I collapse onto one of the beds, and Mabel waits all of five seconds to say, "right. You ready for the tour?"

I sit up and grimace. "Aren't you tired? You've been running around since six o'clock this morning."

"No, I'm not tired, because I'm twenty-one years old. And *you* have been sleeping all afternoon, so get up," she says, and pulls me to my feet.

The 'tour' takes me first around Mabel's dorm building. She shows me how to turn on the shower and then pushes me into the cubicle, leaving cold water to trickle down my hair. I tilt the shower head and leave a splatter of droplets on her shirt. When I turn off the shower and step out she's ready to fend me off with a toilet plunger. I shush her every time she screams, even though we've only passed one other student in the whole building.

The buildings that are used for classes are all locked, but Mabel tries every single door anyway. "This is shaping up to be the worst tour ever," she says, forcefully rattling a door handle. She stops

and looks up at me, eyes wide. "But there is one thing I can show you."

I struggle to keep up with her as she weaves between buildings and hurtles across courtyards. My heels are sore - the shoes I'm wearing were a size too small on purchase but too cute to return, and I've drastically exceeded the twenty minutes or so I can walk around in them without discomfort. My left eye stings from sitting in the sun this afternoon, and keeps clouding over because it needs sleep.

"Come on," Mabel calls out, twenty feet in front of me, standing on the corner of a building.

"Where are we going?" I moan. "Are we even on campus anymore?"

"It's just along here," she says, pointing behind the building.

I cross a patch of grass and slip between two bushes to get to her, then glance into the dark void she just pointed to, a brick wall fading into it.

"It's down there," I say flatly. "The thing that you're so excited to show me... is down there."

She doesn't answer, just begins to walk along the edge of the building. I stay a little closer to her now, reaching out to touch her shirt, irrationally afraid of getting lost. It only takes us twenty seconds to come to the next corner of the building, and tucked away behind it, Mabel points to a black service ladder that, when I look up, appears to extend all the way up to the roof, four or five (six?) stories above us. She stands back, hands on her hips. Proud of herself, for some reason.

"You hate heights," I say.

"I used to. Until my friend Rosie took me up there." She steps into the dirt at the bottom of the ladder and begins to climb it without a second thought.

I stare at her wagging butt for a second too long and call out, "are we even allowed up there?"

Even in the dark I can see her frowning. "There's nobody here, stupid."

I sigh. There's a cylinder of railings wrapping around the ladder from the second floor upwards, so there's no risk of falling off. Maybe if I weren't half-asleep I'd be more liable to object, but I grasp the rung of the ladder just above my head and hoist myself up, and, holy hell, by the time I'm at the top I'm fully awake. As soon as I crest the ladder I see, over the top of the trees lining the campus, the skyscrapers, all brightly lit against the night sky, white, orange, some blue and a dash of red. I take a few steps onto the roof, my mouth agape, and Mabel takes my shoulder and spins me around to face the other direction.

"Fuck," I say, my voice wispy. She chuckles.

There's another line of trees; beyond that, a river, a ferry traveling along it on the opposite side; and beyond that, the golden glow of a home, repeated hundreds if not thousands of times into the distance. At a point it ends and abruptly transitions into a plain black landscape, a single stream of streetlights extending farther than my eyes can see.

I don't know how long I've been staring when I clock that Mabel's arm is around my shoulder. I glance to my side and she smiles so warmly that my arms wrap around her stomach instinctively. Some kind of girly, dreamy sigh that doesn't sound at all like me escapes my throat.

When I focus, I can pick out the headlights of cars crawling along the streets, on their way home or on their way into the city. But I find it best to squint, and let the many hues of golden light dance

on my retinas.

"I think I like the view from our porch in Piedmont better," Mabel says. "But this is good too."

"It's nice," I murmur. "What about the *Aurora Mysterialis*?"

"That wasn't really a view. That was more of an experience. And none of this compares to the views in Gravity Falls."

I frown. "Really?"

"Well, yeah. Up there it's all natural. Unspoiled beauty. Don't you think so?"

"I guess. The lakes are nice. Most of the time though I find it pretty boring."

"That's just because you've lived there your whole life."

"Yeah," I sigh. "Don't remind me."

"What? I think it's nice. You've built up a nice life there. Watching you work around the diner this summer, and watching you at home... you seem so much more relaxed, these days. You seem happy."

The warm breeze sweeps her hair into mine while I struggle for what to say. "There's more to life than working in a diner in the middle of nowhere, though. Especially for a twenty-one year old."

"Why? You enjoy your job and you make a comfortable living."

"But I never get to see anything new," I say. I don't mean to sound annoyed, but this feeling - that I'm not living life to its fullest - it's ingrained in me, and when I can't keep it suppressed it drives me insane. It fully dawns on me now that Mabel's presence has been suppressing it for me for the last two months, and things will go back to normal. As early as tomorrow, in fact. "I do the same thing every day. See the same people. I may enjoy what I do and I may love those people, but... I don't know. I don't know what I'm trying to say." When I turn my head Mabel's looking at me inquisitively. "What?"

She shakes her head in response. "Nothing. I think I get what you're trying to say."

Whatever it is, she doesn't enlighten me. She turns her head back to the suburbs and for a while longer we watch those golden lights diminish in number as their inhabitants turn in for the night.

When we get back to Mabel's dorm room I yawn, collapse onto the bed that isn't covered in her belongings, and ask her what time it is.

"Eleven-thirty," she says, moving some of the boxes from her bed to the floor.

"Then it is still your birthday. And I still have time to give you your present." I sit up and rummage through my beach bag at the side of the bed.

Mabel turns to me and tilts her head. "You didn't have to get me anything."

"It's nothing serious," I say, holding the plastic bag to my chest. And it really isn't. Inside is a pair of sweaters resembling the *Thing 1* and *Thing 2* outfits from *The Cat in the Hat*, only they say *Bitch 1* and *Bitch 2* instead. The product of a juvenile mind, designed for an even more juvenile mind. To emphasize that point, Mabel laughs for longer than I would have ever expected.

"Wait," Mabel says suddenly, holding the sweater up. "You should be Bitch 1 though."

"Why?"

"Because you're like, the, um, what's the word? The dominant one."

"In what way am I the 'dominant' one?"

"You're like, the one who calls the shots. Between us, I mean."

"That has literally never been the case. Two hours into your training at the diner you started telling *me* what to do. And I've been blindly following you around the woods all summer, obeying your every command. The hell are you talking about, I'm the dominant one?"

"Hmm." She frowns, really taking the time to think that through. "Maybe you're right. Anyway, I love it. I'm gonna wear it to bed."

"I got them so that even when we're hundreds of miles apart," I say, pausing to put on my own sweater, "I'll always remember that I'm your bitch."

She cackles and lays back against the unmade bed, bumping her head on a discarded shoe.

"Right, I need the bathroom," I tell her. From the doorway I add, "and just so you know, I'm going down the hall to pee. You know, in the bathroom. I'm not gonna go outside and piss on the wall."

I grin on my way down the hall when I hear her call out, "it was out of service!"

I pause while washing my hands and gaze at myself in the mirror, the silence and the lack of distractions allowing my mind to dwell on the fact that we *will* be hundreds of miles apart, again, starting tomorrow. I lean against the sink, all the energy sucked out of me. How many times in my life has this feeling hit me, the night before she leaves? I sigh and shut off the faucet. It's like every time before - all I can do is make the most of the morning.

Mabel's sitting on my bed when I get back to her room. I grin and point to the other one. "Am I sleeping there now?"

She doesn't answer. She holds out one hand, towards me, and subtly wiggles her finger. My heart leaps, rattles against my ribcage, and the grin falls from my face. I think I feel my eye twitch. She isn't playing around. Her expression is serious, confident, but like she's on the verge of tears.

There's a ringing in my ears as I close the distance, my right hand connecting with her left. I keep walking, and our other hands come together naturally. And then I'm there in between her legs, my knees touching the bed, and her neck is craned up at me. I dip my head and our kiss says so much that we can't say ourselves - I think, more than anything, it says that we could have been something, all of those years ago.

She stands, and we're both too stubborn to separate so our teeth bash together but neither of us seem to care. Her arms wrap around my neck and mine around her waist, the urgency takes over, and after two minutes my back's against the wall, my hair is ruffled, and her sweater is rolled up just below her breasts. I take a moment to breathe, or pant, and when she opens her eyes I frown, the gravity of what's unfolding crushing my head. "This complicates things," I mumble, but in response she goes straight for my lips again, and I let her.

It's a sensation I'll never be able to adequately describe, kissing your best friend, the person you'll love to the grave and the person who knows best how to drive you insane, putting aside years of

rapport and letting attraction take over. The adrenaline could keep me awake for days.

Burning on the inside, I have no choice but to tear off my sweater. I kiss Mabel's neck, jawline, cheek, then her lips, stopping to pull strands of my hair out of my mouth, but my body yearns for more so I pump my hips forward to press against hers, and I don't know how much further I would have gone, if it weren't for the sudden cold touch of her fingertips under my shirt.

I'm back in that room in Wendy's lake house, I'm lying on my back, and Mabel's straddling me, her hair hanging messily, trapping our faces in a sweaty prison. Her pupils are wide in the dark.

I'm in the road, my knees digging into the rough tarmac, and her car is disappearing over the horizon.

And then I'm at that party at the start of the summer, this summer, and Mabel's wearing a green dress and her hair is up in a bun. Her fiancé grabs her waist from behind and for a second her eyes are alight with terror - she isn't startled, I know now, she's afraid.

I turn my head and look at the floor, our heartbeats the only sound in the room. I take a breath and turn back to Mabel.

"What's wrong?" she says, breathless.

I shake my head. "We can't do this."

"Why not?"

I lean back against the wall and stare into her eyes, the anguish preparing a bucket-load of tears to spill all over her carpet.

Her face softens. "You think I'm going to run away again."

I blink my eyes shut, hard, but it doesn't help. I manage to keep in a sob, at least. I feel Mabel roll down my shirt and reach for my hands again.

When I hear her speak, her voice is wet. "I'm not- I'm not that person, anymore, okay? I promise you. *I promise* you, Pacifica, I'm not like that anymore, and I'm so, so sorry."

"I know," I say, shaking my head again.

"You need to know that this is- this is real, it's always been real, how I feel about you. I've never been in the right place to express it, but I am now. I love you. I've always loved you, and I'm so far away from who I used to be when I left you that morning."

"I know," I repeat. "That isn't- I know that you're not like that. But that isn't the problem."

"Then what is?" she pleads, holding my hands to her chest.

"It's what's always been the problem," I say, irrationally bitter. "We live in two separate worlds. You're down here and I'm... up there. It got in the way of us before and it will get in the way again, you know it will."

"Then move here," she breathes, her forehead bumping against my own.

"What?"

"Move here. With me. We'll get an apartment just like you have now, either here or out in the

suburbs." A laugh escapes through her tears. "We'll get an apartment like the one we always talked about. It won't be on the beach, but we'll decorate it like it is. We'll hang surfboards on the wall and rowing oars. We could live somewhere with a balcony overlooking the river."

"I can't do that. What would I do here? I'd be giving up my life in Gravity Falls."

"I know, I know it isn't fair to even be asking you, but... you said so yourself, earlier. You wanna see something new. The city would be new. This is new," she says, chuckling again, picking up our hands and thrusting them into my eyesight. "This is all kinds of new."

I laugh with her but it soon fizzles away. The coolness of her room, without her touch, begins to creep up on me. My bare arms shudder. "Mabel, you were with Jason for five years. Maybe you don't realize it now, but you need time to heal. To forget about him."

She frowns and shakes her head. "No, I-"

"You do, sweetheart, you do. You were talking about him only yesterday, talking about him like... like he never did anything wrong. You do need time, and so do I."

She glances at the floor, but when her eyes meet mine again they're brimming with understanding. She takes a step back, our hands still linked.

"I'm not saying no," I tell her. "And I love you. I love you more than anyone in the world, but, I can't. Not now."

After a moment she murmurs, "it wouldn't be good for either of us."

"Not now."

"Not now." She smiles, in spite of everything, and finally drops my hands. In a motion that will surely haunt my dreams, she steps away, back toward her bed, and says to me, "then I'll wait."

Twenty-Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Are you sure you don't want to stay one more night?"

"I'm sure, Mom," I say, slipping on my shoes.

"I worry about you sometimes, you know. All alone in that apartment."

"Well, it's been like that for a while. Besides, I'm not *all* alone. I have Spark."

"Sparky can't talk to you. He can't... know how you're feeling." With her hands on her hips, she looks at me in that overly-concerned way that's natural to most mothers. My mom picked it up twenty-one years into parenthood. Better late than never, I guess. "I'll see you on Saturday, then?"

"Yeah." I hold out my arms for a hug.

"Happy Thanksgiving, dear," she says over my shoulder.

"Happy Thanksgiving."

On my way back to the apartment I cut across town with Spark and head into the woods. With unrelenting excitement he leads me to the edge of the lake, giving my arms a good workout just trying to keep him under control. I let him off his leash and sit on the muddy shore, watch him wade out into the water and dive for sticks and plastic bottles and whatever else he can find.

About fifty feet down the shore, the old fishing dock sits still in the water. I don't want to go over there today. It's been three months without Mabel in town, and predictably, I miss her. More than I did when we were younger, in fact. As promised she has come back twice to help me train Spark, but she never stayed for a full weekend. I feel guilty even mentioning that she should visit; she's been so busy with college and searching for an evening job. And cheerleading. *And* volunteering part-time at the special needs school. Quelling my loneliness doesn't really compare to any of that.

And that's exactly what I am, again. Lonely. It takes me fifteen minutes lying back on my couch to realize that my mom was right. I have three days off work ahead of me and nothing to do but attend an AA meeting. These are the moments that I'm at my weakest. These are the moments when moseying on over to the little cupboard below the sink, where the bottle of scotch is hidden behind the pipes, becomes so much more tempting.

I can have *one* drink, right? I paired my turkey with lemonade. I watched my mom get sloshed on wine without even trying to manipulate her into pouring me a glass. I've been good. One drink and I'll relax the rest of the day away.

Spark is in the spare bedroom, minding his own business. I walk quietly into the kitchen without his judging eyes on me, and reach past the cleaning products under the sink, past the pipe. Out comes the bottle. Glenfiddich. Fifteen year reserve. It's depressing how just the label and the feel of the bottle in my hands inspires comfort.

But I turn the bottle around and on the back, there's a yellow post-it note: *Freeze! Before you open this bottle, go look in the shoe box in the bottom of your closet.*

Ruling out the possibility of the bottle having become sentient, my understanding settles in on the third read-through of that sentence. In the closet, I throw long-forgotten shirts and bras over my shoulder and eventually retrieve the shoebox, the hiding spot for my vodka. I kneel on the floor and pop it open and the vodka is still in there, but there's a sheet of note paper lying underneath.

Hi Pacifica,

It's me, Mabel. Well, not really. It's a piece of paper. If you're confused, you can just read this with my voice in your head.

Listen, if you need to drink this, I won't stop you. But hear me out, because I don't think you do need it at all.

Sober Pacifica is the nicest person I've ever met. She helped me get a job in the most fun place I've ever worked. She worked day and night to help me carry out my uncle's dying wishes. She helped me leave a boy who wasn't good for me and she let me live in her apartment so that I wouldn't be alone. When I woke up from nightmares about him she was there to calm me down.

I love Sober Pacifica. Like, a lot. I've never met Drunk Pacifica, so I can't say much about her, but I know that she's not the person you want to be. You want to be Sober Pacifica. The person that I know and love.

Just my two cents. x

I sit back and sigh through my nose. Spark comes in and sits next to me with a blank look on his face. I reach up to pet his head. "What am I gonna do, Spark?"

He tilts his head.

"Don't do that," I groan. "She does that all the time."

I check the cabinet under the bathroom sink, at the back, underneath my collection of hotel shampoos. There's a small bottle of whiskey bearing an identical post-it note to the one on the scotch. I'm not surprised or upset that she rummaged through every inch of my personal space - she cleaned the apartment so thoroughly and often that it was inevitable she'd find whatever I had to hide. Finally, I go to the end table by the front door. In the drawer, underneath the diary I don't use, my hip flask has also been tagged. She found every hiding place I restocked over the summer.

I call her up. I don't feel so bad about interrupting her manic life because I know she'll be at home today, giving herself a break. It rings five times.

"Hey, you. What's wrong?"

I sit at my kitchen counter and frown. "Nothing. Why would something be wrong?"

"Because you never call me. I call you. That's how we do it. That's how we've always done it."

"Relax," I tell her. "I just... I don't know." I nervously crinkle the letter between my fingers. "I wanted to hear your voice."

"Aww, you're sweet. Did you have a good Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah, it was nice. Just me and Mom. And Spark and Toby, causing trouble as always. How was yours?"

"It was good. Pretty standard. I ate too much turkey and now I'm insecure about my weight. I'm sitting here pinching my belly and flapping it up and down."

"You're not fat, Mabel."

"You say that, but I'm putting on weight. Must be 'cause you're not here to coax me in to running. And Stephanie had trouble lifting me last week in practice! She claimed that her shoulder was aching, but I don't buy it."

"Well, why don't you let me be the judge next time I see you? I have a feeling you're exaggerating."

"Maybe. Speaking of which, it's about time you came to see me, isn't it? Maybe we could plan something around Christmas?"

A tear drips onto my arm before I even feel them in my eyes. "Yeah."

The line is silent for a moment. "I knew something was wrong," Mabel says softly. "What is it?"

"Nothing," I say, wiping my eyes. "I love you."

"I love you too, Pacifica, but what's wrong? You can tell me."

"It's nothing, really. I'm fine. I'm gonna call you later, okay? I, um... please don't worry. I'll call you later."

I hang up the phone before she responds and tap my foot on the floor at sonic speed. Mabel calls back but I decline it. I *did* need to hear her voice. Now, I need to make a level-headed decision.

Wendy meets me at Lookout Point just before sunset - a plateau overlooking town and the vast stretches of woodland surrounding it on every side. I'm sitting on a low fence, dangerously close to the steep drop-off, but the height doesn't terrify me like it once did. Wendy pulls up to my right in her van, and as usual we're the only people up here.

She jumps out and glares at me, hands on hips. "The hell, P? D'you walk up here?"

"I ran," I call back. "Needed the fresh air."

She approaches me warily, because it's a long run up the mountain. Took about an hour. And I'm well aware of the sweat patches visible on my shirt, below my pits. She probably thinks I've gone insane. "Are you insane?"

See?

"Just come sit," I tell her.

She squirms on the fence post for a moment, trying to find a position that won't bruise her butt. "What's in the bag?"

I pick up the black trash bag that I carried up here and hold it out to her. "A present."

Again with the wariness. She peers into the bag like I've booby-trapped it, then pulls out one of the bottles. "You've been drinking?"

"No. All those bottles are sealed. You can have them." I hadn't planned on giving a full explanation, but it begins to roll off my tongue nonetheless. "I hide them around my apartment. It's like a compulsion. I hide them in case I ever need them, and this afternoon I thought I needed them, and... I pulled out the bottle of scotch from the kitchen cupboard and there was a note on it. Mabel had found it, and she'd written a note on it telling me not to drink it. A really nice note. She found all of them. All of those bottles."

Way above the cliff on the other side of Gravity Falls, an eagle soars silently across my field of vision, a black silhouette against the orange-blue sky.

"I'm in love with her," I say, only vaguely aware that I'm talking out loud. I turn to Wendy and her face is sympathetic, like I'm a little lost lamb.

"Oh, P." She puts an arm around me and I let my head fall on her shoulder. For a few minutes I soak in the view. Wendy's shirt smells faintly of cigarettes but it isn't even unpleasant, it's familiar and comfortable. As the adrenaline from running fully wears off and my eyelids fight to stay open, Wendy says, "what do you think she's doing right now?"

"I don't know." What I *hope* she's doing is sitting on her parents' porch, watching over the heights of San Francisco, thinking about me. I'll ask her later, when I phone her. Here, in a far more remote part of the world, I watch as the lights in town flicker to life - the street lamps on Main Street, the town mall. The apartments surrounding my own, my mom's house. Way off in the distance, even the doors of the theater cast out a yellow glow - maybe there's a show on tonight, and the dead, dusty rooms we explored in the summer will bustle with aspiring performers. "It's a pretty town," I say.

"Yeah," Wendy says. "It has its moments."

"But sometimes I'm ready to leave it all behind."

She hums in agreement. I wait for a minute but she says nothing more, maybe she didn't even hear me properly, I don't know. I sigh quietly and shut my eyes. It's what we've been saying for years, in variations - *this town is too small for us; we've gotta get out of here; we're not the elderly homesteaders this town was built for*. Wendy has no way of knowing that this time is different. I made up my mind hours ago.

On Monday morning Lindsay is in high spirits, Beth is singing absentmindedly in her low, angelic voice, every breakfast patron I serve greets me with a smile and asks me about my weekend and everything feels so, so normal, that I almost - *almost* - don't tell Lindsay that I need to speak to her.

Two weeks later, I sit opposite her in a booth by the window, bright and early, before we've opened up.

She straightens the sheets of paper that took five minutes to churn out of the fossil of a printer we have in the back office. She clears her throat. "Well, then. Since your first day working here you have been an outstanding example of..." Her freshly made-up face contorts and she lifts a hand to her eyes.

The waterworks. She lasted longer than I expected, honestly.

I sit still, board up my own tears. No need for two soppy messes at this table. "Come on," I say gently. "You can get through this."

She gasps in air and dabs her eyes; with a flick of her hand she has converted back to pure professionalism. "You have been an outstanding example of dedication, maturity, and camaraderie. Outside of the workplace, you have been both the daughter that I never had, and a true, reliable friend. In accordance with the guidelines of the Oregon Better Dining Association, I will now conduct your exit interview, in which you are free to express your opinions of how the work environment at Greasy's Diner could be improved for future employees. Question one: If you were to relive your time working here, what would you change?"

"Nothing."

"Oh. Okay. That was an easy one--"

"No, wait. I'd throw out that computer. I wouldn't be surprised if it caught fire any moment now."

Lindsay scribbles something down. I can tell that she isn't going to throw out the computer.

"Question two: Is there anything about the managing staff that you feel is inadequate?"

"Inadequate? No. No way. If I had to say anything, I'd say... you set an unrealistic example of what to expect from a boss. You're more like a mother that's been stripped of all the annoying parts. Um... you care too much about me? Can I say that?"

She chuckles and again, jots down something I can't see. When she looks up I can tell she's on the verge of tears again and she says, "um, question three: Do you have any plans to visit Greasy's Diner in the coming months, even if you are relocating to a different state or country?"

"It doesn't say that on the bit of paper," I tell her, my voice breaking.

She lets out a sob and we both stand. She hurries around the table and hugs me tightly. I clench my eyes shut but it doesn't stop me from crying.

"Of course I'll come to visit," I say. "I'm going to come back at least once a month for the next year. Then we'll see how we go from there." I draw back and hold onto her arms, meet her bloodshot eyes. "And *you* are going to come see me in California. We'll go to the beach and get wicked tans and maybe I'll even let you talk about guys."

Lindsay laughs. "You don't want me down there, cramping your style."

"Cramping *my* style? Lindsay, you have more 'style' than I'll ever have, believe me. And you look younger than I do. No, my mind is made up. In the spring, you will close this place up for the weekend and we'll live the good life for a few days. We'll be beach babes."

"You're going to thrive down there. I can feel it."

I smile. "I'm finally doing it."

And I finally do it in the middle of January.

Granted, it takes a full week of second-guessing myself, resisting the urge to sprint to the diner and ask for my job back, and at one point, spontaneously exploding in tears halfway through packing up a box of my stuff.

But I do finally do it. My apartment shows evidence of me having lived there for three years, and

then it doesn't. It isn't until the last box is out, until the place is bare, that the weight of my decision sets in.

"It's sad, isn't it?" Nina says from behind me.

I didn't hear her coming up the stairs, over the voice in my head screaming *I DON'T LIKE CHANGE*.

"I don't like thinking that a couple of strangers will be walking around in here soon. Making it their own."

"It's just an apartment," I say, trying to suck all the sentimental value out of the place so I don't end up in tears. "A temporary living space."

Nina stands where the couch used to be and looks down. "Wine stain," she says.

"Mhmm." That's from one of our drunken late-night trysts - she straddled me without warning and I dropped my glass. We moved the couch forward the following morning to cover up the red stain. Strangely, this is the first time I'm noticing that I don't think about those days a whole lot anymore.

I usher Nina out and head downstairs to her car, because I could stand around in the empty rooms and reminisce for hours, but it would only make leaving that little bit harder. Mom is in the back seat, Spark on her lap. I clamber into the passenger seat of the two-door Ford something-or-other that a few months working in a donut shop has bought Nina.

"All locked up?" Mom asks.

"Yep. All done."

Nina gets in the car and faces me. "Any word from Wendy?"

"Nope." It's been almost a full week since I told her I was moving, and she hasn't spoken to me since. I haven't tried speaking to her either, but, come on, she stormed out of the diner on me. It's her responsibility to mend things. I don't see how she went from being my own personal cheerleader behind courting Mabel, to resenting my decision to finally do something about it.

"She'll come around," Nina says, starting the engine. "It's just how things go in Gravity Falls. We're all in it together - the small-town boredom - and then somebody leaves and the rest of us are like, now what? The more friends that escape, the less reason you have to be there yourself."

"I don't understand it," my mom says, with a trace of condescension. "Gravity Falls is a beautiful little town. I think sooner or later both of you are going to realize what you're missing." She waits a moment before leaning forward and adding, "but I can see how Sacramento will be better suited to your lifestyle, honey. Plus, I've heard California is swarming with lesbians. I'm sure in a few months you'll have somebody to introduce me to."

I turn in my seat and frown, but my mom's smile tells me that that was at least an attempt at being supportive. "Thanks, Mom."

Nina casts me a sideways glance that says something like, *you haven't told her about Mabel?* No, Nina, I haven't told her about Mabel. I've barely been able to come to terms with the fact that I'm moving to a different state in pursuit of a girl. In what kind of story does *that* ever end well?

My new one-bedroom apartment is in East Sacramento, a couple of miles from Mabel's college. It's on the ground floor of a three-story building, with light coming in on three sides. The front door

leads directly to my living room, with the kitchen on the right, both needlessly huge, whereas the bedroom and bathroom on the left are a bit more cramped than what I had before. At the far end of the living room a sliding glass door opens up to my own fenced-in back yard, though I estimate that it could fit about five people shoulder-to-shoulder at maximum capacity. I'll probably plant some flowers out there, not bother to water them for a few months, and then dig out the crumbling remains one sunny day while scolding myself for planting them in the first place.

Still, since moving my furniture in yesterday, the place has already begun to feel like home. I seem to have subconsciously matched the layout of my old living room as closely as possible. And the only downside I've noticed so far is that my upstairs neighbors are a little loud. Yesterday when I was moving the couch around I could hear a man and a woman trading obscenities that even Wendy wouldn't utter out loud. Oh well. In all likelihood one of them will murder the other before long, and then I'll be back to peace and quiet.

It's only after I've let Mom and Nina into the apartment that I notice the piano in the corner of the room, which certainly wasn't there yesterday. "What the hell?"

"I hope you don't mind," Mom says. "I had a moving truck bring it down here yesterday afternoon. With the key you gave me."

"Mom, I haven't played in years," I say, approaching the thing like it's a wild animal. I lift up the cover and run my hand along the keys; it's so clean that it sparkles in the sunlight.

"I know that," she says. "But I thought now might be the time to start again. New city, new inspiration. You used to make such beautiful music. I know I never... supported you, in that regard. I really should have."

I look up at my mom. There it is again - the belated warmth and love. "Thank you, Mom. I think that's a great idea."

When we've unloaded Nina's car, I'm faced with the fallout of my haphazard packing, finding that the things I need right away are at the very bottom of boxes. I try not to make this obvious to Nina, who will slap me across the face with an *I told you so*.

"I think I'll go check in to my hotel," Mom says.

I stop rummaging for my deodorant and frown at her. "Hotel? What hotel? I thought you were staying with me." She arranged to stay for a week to both help me settle in and to soak up some sun, which has been hiding away from Oregon all winter.

"You don't want me here all week. I'll only be getting in your way and nosing into your business."

I shake my head. "It's fine, I don't mind-"

"Well my hotel is already booked." She cups my cheeks and kisses my forehead. "You need your space. We'll hang out during the daytime and I'll get out of your hair in the evening."

Ultimately, I'm grateful. Mom and I have been getting along better than I would have ever dreamed, but a week in close proximity could definitely take a toll on that. "If you say so."

"Besides," she says. "I might get lucky."

I grimace. "The words every daughter longs to hear from her mother."

She shoulders her bag and moves to the front door, hugs Nina goodbye, pats Spark's head. Then to

me, "call me tomorrow and we'll go explore, 'kay?"

"Okay."

"Love you."

"Love you too."

Nina and I head out to get some lunch shortly after, and on the way there I pull out my phone and text two world-shaking words to Mabel:

I'm here.

Thirty seconds later I receive a stream of party hat emojis followed by:

woo woo! we still on for dinner?

I text back, *7pm. BE THERE*, and then spend two minutes wondering if the capitalization was too much.

The clock on Nina's dashboard reads 2:04 P.M., so I know I have a solid five hours ahead of me that I'll be a nervous wreck.

Chapter End Notes

Almost forgot to post two weeks running. My head has not been in the writing world lately, which SUCKS.

But thank you guys for reading, we have two chapters to go, and I hope you all enjoy the holidays!

Twenty-Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She's already sat at a table when I walk in. In a black ruffled skirt that hangs almost to her shins and a tight white shirt with very short sleeves, hair up in a ponytail. Nothing too formal, because this isn't a date.

I'll repeat that, to my pounding heart: This is not a date.

I've gone for blue jeans and a low-cut purple button-up. Again, nothing too formal. *Because this is not a date.*

As soon as she sees me she's on her feet. She scurries between tables with a smile on her face and pulls me into an aggressive hug. The waiter that was about to seat me hangs around awkwardly for a few seconds, then darts off elsewhere. I wouldn't be so soppy out loud, but the journey down here was almost worth it just to feel Mabel in my arms.

She pulls back and says, "god, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"Why are your eyes sore?"

"It's an expression."

"I know *that*. People usually say that when there's something bothering them. Like, 'I've been having a hard time lately, so it's good to see you.'"

"Oh. No, everything's dandy. Come on," she says, tugging my wrist. "Come sit."

It's straight out of a romance movie, the way that we glance around at the insignificant objects on the table, before our eyes meet and we both break out into shy smiles.

"You look beautiful," she says.

"Thank you. So do you." I clear my throat, remembering myself. "But it doesn't matter."

"Right."

"Because this isn't a date."

"Right." She nods vigorously. "Of course. This is... just two friends, having dinner, catching up, and maybe eventually discussing the prospect of becoming more than friends."

"That's right." It's what we agreed on, knowing that our previous attempts at taking our relationship to another level have been ineffectual, at best. I was the driving force behind that decision - you may have noticed by now that Mabel tends to dive into things head-first, especially when it comes to love. And as hard as it is to not throw myself across the table and kiss her gorgeous pink lips, I need to know that she can be patient, that she'll wait for me if need be. For the first time in my life, I'm standing up for my own heart.

So I order a Sprite and we talk about small things. I tell her about the drive to Cali and my new apartment, which she will see after dinner. Every time she talks about college or work I stare too long at her rosy cheeks or her mascaraed lashes, and I have to fight away the fluttering feeling in

my chest.

"Have you heard from Stan at all?" I ask, between bites of my salad.

"Mhmm," Mabel hums. "He arrived back on land last week. We had a really long talk over the phone, which is *so* unusual for Stan. Normally he likes to wrap things up in five minutes to keep his phone bill down, but he just talked and talked and talked. He must have been so lonely out at sea."

"Aww. Did he tell you where he's been?"

"Nope," she sighs. "We talked about Ford a little bit, but he didn't tell me anything about the clues he'd been given. I don't get why him and Dipper have been so secretive about it. I told them about the Aurora Mysterialis right away." Her face softens. "He didn't sound the same. He sounded like all the life had been sucked out of him. And I don't think it's just because he's getting older, I think it's because of Ford. I've read things about... losing a twin. It can throw your entire world off course. I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to Dipper. I think I'd just stop functioning completely."

"Jesus," I say. "I thought we were keeping the conversation light."

She laughs while chewing and covers her mouth. "Sorry."

"I think he'll be okay," I tell her. "Give him some time back on land and he'll be back to his old self. I think if he's been traveling for seven or eight months with the sole purpose of obeying his brother's every wish, then Ford was going to be on his mind the whole time. But that might be what he needed, like a really long, proper goodbye. That's more than most people get."

After a few silent seconds I look up from my plate and find her staring at me. Just as I'm about to ask if I said something wrong, she smiles with enough love to send my head reeling. "I hadn't thought of it like that," she says.

Now, I don't know if there's some kind of demonic higher power up in the sky that has myself and Mabel hooked up to puppet strings, but sometimes I think that there is. *Something* out there must siphon a lot of joy from driving a wedge between us when things are going well, because it happens too often, and I'm afraid to say that tonight turns out no different.

We're halfway through dessert. Mabel ordered a rocky road sundae and I thought, *shit, that sounds good*, so I asked for one as well. I hear her phone vibrating in her purse, which she ignores, but when it begins a second round of buzzing right after, she licks her fingers and reaches for it.

It's not often that you witness the color drain from somebody's face so up close. I slowly bring my chewing to a halt. "What's wrong?"

The phone stops vibrating in her hand, and Mabel glances up at me and then around the restaurant, as if she forgot for a moment that she was in public. "It's, um- it's Jason."

My body sinks against my seat.

The phone buzzes again, just once. "He left a voicemail," Mabel murmurs.

Jason. Ex-fiancé Jason. The abuser. The man who was sent to prison for six months. And guess what? Six months is already up.

Mabel slides the phone back into her purse, and begins to stir her sundae with her spoon, fixated on

the tablecloth. With every clink of spoon against glass, I feel more and more invisible. "Mabel?"

She looks up, manages a weak smile.

"What are you thinking?"

"I don't know. I guess I didn't realize how long it's been."

I nod, and glance down at my ice cream. The sight of it makes me feel sick. I'm trying really, really hard not to be selfish, and to put myself in Mabel's shoes. She was with the guy for four years - a phone call after six months of not speaking is a big deal, no matter how much of a monster he is.

"Let's not think about it," Mabel says. She reaches across the table and touches my hand. "I don't want it to ruin the night."

But of course, neither of us can stop thinking about it. We split the check, even after Mabel makes a show of waving her credit card around and slapping the wallet out of my hand. We walk out of the restaurant, along the street to Mabel's car, my hair occasionally being whipped out of order by the wind. I almost threw away my jackets when I was packing my stuff up in Oregon; I see now that that would have been a mistake. When we last drove through the streets of Sacramento nightlife, on the way to Mabel's dorm, I remember that the lights and the crowds enlivened me, as cities often do to a small town girl. Tonight, the lights are spotlighting clumps of litter along the sidewalks, and the crowds bombarding us are merely drunk idiots yelling to be heard over each other. Scary how your mood can mess with your perspective.

When I shut the door to Mabel's Jeep and the noise is muffled, I feel a split-second of relief before doubting that the suffocating silence between myself and Mabel is any better than being outside. We smile at each other before she starts the engine, the kind of smile with zero conviction behind it.

"I'm excited to see Spark again," she says.

"Yeah. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you."

I direct her around my new neighborhood, circling the same block a couple of times because I forgot what street I live on. Eventually we get a parking space right out front of the apartment, and Mabel shuts off the engine. I step out. She doesn't. She gazes through the windshield at nothing, then says to me, "I'm just gonna listen to that voicemail."

I swallow. It hurts. "Okay." I walk up the path to my front door, trying not to look over my shoulder. Spark jumps up at my legs and then becomes gravely concerned by the car parked outside. I tell him to sit still at my feet while I watch Mabel listen to her phone, but her expression is so unwavering that it's impossible to tell what Jason is saying.

It takes about thirty seconds, then she comes up the path and fusses over Spark in the doorway for a moment.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," she sighs, sweeping fur off her hands. "He said sorry about five times. Wanted to meet up to talk."

"Are you going to?"

"I think so, yeah."

How many more bombs are going to be dropped on my head tonight? I'm becoming a threat to national security. "Oh."

She tilts her head. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you think it's a stupid idea. He only wants to talk."

"And you want to listen?"

"Yes. Pacifica, the last time I saw him was out of one eye. Right after he hit me. You never saw it, but he wasn't always like that, he wasn't always in that... crazed, jealous state. He did good things for me and he loved me. I don't know if I want the last memory of our relationship to be me cowering on the floor while he yells in my face."

"Well, why not? That *is* what happened, and you left him for it. Now as soon as he's out of prison you want to run into his arms and let him talk you down? He's manipulative, Mabel. You're falling into a trap."

She folds her arms and takes a step toward me, speaks in a soft tone. "Pacifica, sweetie, there is no trap. If I'm going to meet him it'll be in a public place, in the daytime. Nothing will happen." She frowns. "Wait, you're not worried that I'd actually consider getting back together with him, are you?"

"No." An outrageous lie.

An outrageous lie that she has clearly seen through, judging by the flash of anger on her face. "How little do you think of me? I would never even *dream* of it."

"Really? Because you jumped into bed with me pretty easily when you started dating him."

It's one of the few things I've said in my life that I've wanted to take back before I was even done saying it. Ever since her cell phone rang the images of the two of them together have been mounting up in my head, making me sick, and I've dealt with it by falling back on my old ways and dishing out a catty remark that's barely even relevant. In fact, I'm only one punch away from being the jealous maniac that Jason was.

Mabel's mouth drops open slightly, and I think I see her blink away tears when she spins around and hurries to the door.

"Mabel," I say, but all I get in response is *slam*. Spark looks between me and the door and whines, clearly distressed that his two favorite humans are arguing. He scratches at the door and barks (*go after her, you idiot!*)

And I do - I open the door and run down the path to the road but I'm too late, and as I turn to my left, I'm confronted with the haunting, familiar image of her car disappearing from view.

The mailman around here is fucking persistent; he's been spamming my doorbell for at least three minutes now, but I'm pretty cosy in bed. Must be a city thing. The wrinkly old mailman in Gravity Falls would usually deliver everything to my downstairs neighbor and then fall asleep in his van before his round was even halfway done.

My phone buzzes on the bedside table - Mom's calling.

"Yo," says my groggy morning voice.

"Hello. Are you home?"

"Yeah, the friggin' mailman's giving me a headache."

She's quiet for a beat. "What mailman?"

"The mailman. Must have rung my doorbell like, twenty times. I think he's finally given up, though."

"Pacifica, that's me. I said I'd be here at twelve."

I pull the phone away from my ear and check the time. 12:06. "Oh, *shit*."

Mom looks concerned when I open the door. "Did you just wake up?"

I glance down at my sleep shorts, the white tank top with an orange splotch from my late-night spaghetti. I look in the mirror to my left and my hair resembles one of those giant spinning brushes in a car wash. "Maybe," I say.

She tuts and steps inside. "If sleeping were an Olympic sport, you'd be the champion. Late night?"

"Kinda. Couldn't sleep."

"Go get yourself showered and I'll put some coffee on," she says, holding her hands to her chest as if my filth is contagious.

I oblige, and although twenty minutes later I smell like a fresh meadow, I still feel like a walking turd. The memory of Mabel's tear-stricken face storming out of my apartment has been playing on repeat, and it's been... fourteen hours. No end in sight.

When the aroma of coffee lures me back to the kitchen, I find my mom hastily rummaging through all of my empty cabinets. "Um. What are you doing?"

She spins around. "Nothing."

I take a cup from the counter and roll my eyes. "I haven't been drinking, Mom. I promise."

"I'm just making sure. Have you looked up local AA groups yet?"

"I moved in yesterday. Give me a chance."

She plants her hands on her hips. "If you're going to be moody all day, it's not going to be a nice start to my vacation. I already had a disaster at the hotel last night. I asked them for another pillow but nobody came up to give me one, so I had to walk down to reception, and the lady said-"

At some point I tune her out and think about Mabel again. She'll be awake and going about her day as usual, maybe hanging out with her college friends. We've always been polar opposites after a fight - she finds comfort in her routine, anything to keep her mind away from it, whereas I prefer to lounge about for hours upon hours and mentally rewrite the offending conversation in my head. And man, last night needs a whole lot of rewriting.

Mom and I end up having quite the pleasant day. We spend the afternoon shopping for frivolous

things, and the sparkling silver anklet I buy takes my mind off of Mabel for all of five minutes, before I decide that she would have loved one for herself and I run back to the store to buy another. If she decides to never speak to me again, I'll give it to charity.

We eat dinner on the terrace of a restaurant overlooking the river, and watch ferries sail past while the sun sets behind the city. When it gets dark, pretty colored lights from the surrounding bars and restaurants dance on the surface of the water. I'd love to have some time to appreciate it, but Mom's finished her third glass of wine and has decided it's the time of the night to diagnose her daughter's love life.

From across the table she hisses, "psst," about as indiscreetly as *psst* can possibly be uttered.

"What?"

She tips her glass in the direction of four dolled-up women that are just sitting down a few tables behind me.

I repeat, "what?"

"Any of them look like your type?"

"Oh, for god's sake."

"Four girls there. I read a statistic somewhere - one in four people in California are homosexuals."

"Where'd you read that? *Obviously Bullshit Magazine?*"

"I'm just trying to get a sense for your likes and dislikes," she says, leaning in and whispering, as if this is the part of the conversation that needs to be kept quiet. "I'm going to want grandchildren eventually, you know."

"Great. Well, why don't you go tell those ladies that?"

She lowers her brows. "Do you actually want me to?"

"No!" A couple sitting by the door to the restaurant turn their heads and I clear my throat. "There's something I should tell you, anyway. And I didn't want to tell you while you were drunk, but, hey, maybe it'll go down better. Mom..." I glance up. Her eyes are so soft that I almost blurt out that I love her. That would be embarrassing.

"I moved here because I'm in love with Mabel," I say. "And she knows that, and she says that she's in love with me, and I believe her, I think, but I keep getting a sinking feeling that she's still hung up on her ex-boyfriend. And I kinda told her that last night and she didn't take it very well, and now we're not talking, and-" it dawns on me, mid-sentence, that I'm asking my mother for help - "and I don't know what to do."

Mom takes a few seconds for all of that to sink in, then reaches across the table and squeezes my fingers. "Oh, honey, you moved all the way here for a girl?"

I wince, unsure if I'm about to cry. "Was that a bad idea?"

"Well... I'm not sure. Does it feel like a bad idea?"

And... yep, there it is. I'm crying. In a very public place. "It does right now, yeah."

"Oh, Pacifica, don't cry." She riffles through her purse and pulls out a pack of cigarettes, holds

them out to me.

I widen my eyes. "Mom."

"Oops," she squeaks. "Sorry, hold on." She dives back into the bag and retrieves a packet of pocket tissues. "Here."

I take the tissues but eye her warily.

"I haven't smoked in years," she says. "I keep them in here in case of an emergency. Listen, I know for a *fact* that you didn't move here just for Mabel. You moved here for this," she gestures around at the terrace, and the surrounding scenery, "for the city. This is your change of pace, your change of lifestyle. You've been talking about it for years and now you're finally here, doing it, and it feels a little overwhelming, right?"

Somehow that causes more tears to emerge and fuck up my make-up, but I nod along to what my mother is saying.

"It'll take some time to get used to. That's why I'm here with you, for this first week. And ultimately it doesn't matter whether you have Mabel at your side or not, but all I'll say is, if she does choose that man over you, then she doesn't know what she's missing."

I swallow a lump, the possibility of it - of Mabel choosing him - causing me more pain than I'd like to admit. "She wouldn't still want to be with him, would she? I mean, I can't see how she could, but then I remember that she stayed with him for four years, so there must have been *something* about him. And if there is then she could easily fall for that same part of him all over again."

Mom glances down at the table and takes a breath. "Sometimes we love people through the ugliest of ugliness." She pauses. "Your father, he was never abusive, but he was... loud, and angry. And sometimes he made decisions without a trace of thought as to how it would affect the rest of the family."

My shock seems to have clogged up my tear ducts. In my young adult life I have not heard my mom talk remotely openly about her relationship with my dad; it's rare that his name is even mentioned.

"But I loved him right up until the end. Through all of the ugliness."

I have a vivid flashback to my dad's funeral. I remember hearing the quiet sob beside me and glancing sideways to my mom and thinking *why are you crying for that man?* I'm only twenty-one. Maybe I don't know as much about love as I thought I did.

"I love you," I say, taking a few seconds to realize I've said it out loud.

She stills for a moment but smiles. "I love you too, honey." She leans across the table. "Hey, what do you say we get the check, get some ice cream from the 7-Eleven, and watch some trashy reality TV in my hotel room? That always makes me feel better."

At 10 o'clock the next morning, I'm woken by the doorbell again, and when it rings the second time I'm snapped out of my sleepy stupor, because Mom isn't coming round today. That can only be Mabel. I throw on a t-shirt and stagger to the front door, barely awake enough to keep both my eyes open. I don't know how awful I look and I don't know what I'll say but I know that I need to see her, because my mood swings have been wild since our fight, and with every hour that passes I

worry that we've already slipped into the kind of stalemate that kept us from talking for four years.

But I open the door and Wendy's standing there, holding a dinky cactus in a plant pot.

I blink a few times. "What the hell are you doing here?"

She frowns.

"Wow. Sorry, that was really rude. I mean, what are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd come and apologize in person. I brought you a housewarming present," she says, holding up the cactus.

My lips curl upwards and I step aside to let her in. "You're sweet," I say, taking the cactus. "You drove all the way here to see me?"

"Yeah, it was gross. I've been up since six. But, um, yeah. I am really sorry I've been ignoring you. I don't have a lot of friends left in Gravity Falls, and you're one of my favorite people, so... it was hard to see you go. I felt kinda betrayed. Which I realize now is totally irrational, but I didn't at the time."

"It's okay," I sigh. "I felt the same way when Nina moved out. I don't think either of us respond well to change." I place the cactus on the kitchen counter and plod to the coffee machine.

Wendy scans the living room curiously, and then her eyes land on my bedroom door. She steps up next to me and lowers her voice to a whisper. "So is Mabel here?"

My eyebrows drop. "No. Why would she be here?"

"Because you came here to confess your love to her, didn't you? Oh no. Don't tell me she rejected you."

"Nobody rejected anybody. And I didn't come here to 'confess my love to her,' I came here so we could talk, and maybe, eventually, start dating. But I don't think that's going to happen anymore." My blasé tone of voice falters, remembering what I last said to Mabel. Now that I'm awake I can't imagine what I would have said if it was her at the door. I could have easily made things worse.

Wendy scoffs, like a child not getting their way. "Well why the hell not?"

"Because Jason's out of prison. And as soon as Mabel found that out, she wanted to meet up with him. Well, Jason called her, asking to meet him, but she wants to do it."

"So? That doesn't mean anything. They might be... giving each other their stuff back, or something."

"You weren't there. You should have seen her face. We went out to dinner on Friday night and after she got that call she just spaced the fuck out, like I wasn't even there. For the whole night. And-" I huff, realizing what I'm saying - "I know that it isn't that simple, I know that they were together for a long time and even though he's an abusive piece of shit, she's still going to have feelings for him, but... I don't know. Whatever. It doesn't matter. I said some things to her that I shouldn't have, and I'll call her in a couple days to apologize, and then we'll go back to being friends like we always have."

I haven't even sipped my coffee yet and my brain seems to be running haywire. Wendy takes a sip of hers, somehow immune to the scalding heat, and studies me intensely.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I say.

She sets her cup down on the counter and takes a breath. "You know what you and I are gonna do? We're gonna have a 'fuck Mabel' day. Go have a shower, put on some pretty clothes that'll make you feel nice, and we'll go out and do stuff that'll take your mind off her completely. We'll go bowling. Or golf, you like golf."

"Can we call it something a little less... mean?"

"Nope. We are calling it 'fuck Mabel' day, because why?"

"Because... fuck Mabel," I murmur.

She pats my shoulder. "Go on. Run along."

I shower, brush my teeth, change into a zebra-print top and some skinny jeans. And Wendy's right, it does make me feel better, if only for a fleeting second when I admire myself in the mirror. It reminds me of dressing up for a night out, and the tantalizing prospect of finding a girl to go home with. I'm in a city now, in California. I could find another lesbian on the sidewalk outside my front door.

But in truth I know that I'm not going to meet anybody for a long, long time, because Mabel has set my standards unreasonably high. My smile in the mirror dissipates, morphs into an ugly pout. I'll call her tonight.

Wendy's van trundles around my new neighborhood, heading into town. I nibble on a cereal bar, gazing out the window at the passing houses, trying my best to focus on Wendy's story about walking in on her brother in a fursuit. We pass a girl on the sidewalk that looks like Mabel - mismatched socks and lustrous brown hair - but my heart calms down when I realize it isn't her.

And then we pass a plaque jutting out of a hedgerow that reads *CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY SACRAMENTO*. I glare at Wendy, who seems to have put on a smirk in anticipation. "What are you doing?" I ask her.

She doesn't answer. The van turns onto a road that I recognize from when I helped Mabel move into her dorm.

"Seriously, Wendy, where are we going?"

"Oh, you didn't think I was serious about 'fuck Mabel' day, did you? No, I love that girl. And so do you." She pulls into a parking space around the side of the dorm building and shuts off the engine. "In fact, you're crazy about her. So we're going to go upstairs and you're gonna patch things up with her."

I shoot her an incredulous look and fold my arms. "I'm not doing that."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not. You're meddling with my life here, Wendy. You don't have the right to do that."

She opens her door but pauses, looks back at me. "How happy would you be if you were dating Mabel Pines?"

I shrug. "Extremely."

Wendy nods. "Okay. Meddling's worth it, then," and then she hops out onto the tarmac and shuts the door behind her.

"I'm not going with you," I call out through the glass, but she either doesn't hear me or pretends not to as she saunters away. I watch her disappear around the corner of the building. With the absence of the engine, the radio, and the air con, I'm left with nothing but a dull ringing in my ears and my own stupid thoughts. "God dammit," I mutter, and I run after her.

I catch up with Wendy in an elevator, just before the doors squash my shoulder blades together. A couple of guys sharing the car look me up and down and I catch a glimpse of my frazzled face in the mirror. "You're insane," I murmur to Wendy. "You're just gonna leave your van unlocked?"

She laughs. "I love my van, but it's a piece of junk. Nobody's gonna try stealing that." She points at the button panel. "What floor?"

I glare at her. "You don't even know what room she's in?"

"I will bang on every door in this building if I have to."

I exhale through my nose and press the button for the third floor. I remember her room number but I don't even need it - I remember the exact location of her door, despite how long and featureless the hallway is. It's hard to forget the painfully quiet walk out of here with Mabel the morning after we kissed, when she walked me down to the bus stop.

Wendy doesn't give me any time to compose myself, just raps on the door like I'm not even there.

I say, "she has a roommate, you know."

"So?"

We wait about a minute; three knocks. I'm about to say, *well, she isn't here*, but the door swings open and there she is, in a gray t-shirt, turquoise pajama bottoms with little ice cream cones on, her hair disheveled. Her eyes flick between us, turn as wide as saucers, then she slams the door in our faces.

"Jesus," Wendy says to me. "What did you do to her?" She bangs on the door again - "Mabel? You okay, buddy? We just wanted to talk."

A thought makes my stomach churn, and my knees feel weak. "What if *he's* in there?"

"He isn't."

"How do you know?"

Her eyes narrow. "You really think she'd do that?"

"I don't know," I say, flinging my hands in the air. "Sometimes I feel like I have no idea what she's capable of."

The door opens again and Mabel leans against it, a toothbrush sticking out of her mouth. Through foam, she says something I interpret as, "hey guys. Come on in."

Wendy accepts the invitation and I follow behind. I don't look Mabel in the eye but she says directly to me, "and no, he isn't here," which makes me blush furiously. Wendy and I stand in the small living area and listen as Mabel runs to the sink in her bedroom to spit. She comes back in,

wiping her hands on her pants, and smiles. "How are you both?"

I don't even have time to answer; Wendy cuts right to the chase and says she's going to go see if she can score some weed. I doubt she's lying - we could smell it on our way down the hall.

"Oh," Mabel says. "Okay."

"You two should catch up. I'll be back in a little bit."

The door opens and closes behind me. Mabel smiles again and sits on the arm of her couch, gestures to the other couch opposite. I can't really feel my legs, so I stay put.

"Did you sleep in late?" I ask.

"I did."

"That's not like you."

She shrugs. "I haven't really been sleeping well since the other night."

My body relaxes a little, relieved that our argument seems to have weighed on her as much as it weighed on me. And then I feel awful, and selfish, because of course she wouldn't be in here with Jason. I mean more to her than that. "I'm really sorry," I tell her. "For what I said. It was vicious, and stupid. I was mad that you wanted to see Jason and, well, you know me. Sometimes I like to say the worst thing that comes into my head."

Mabel's eyes soften. "It's okay. I mean, you were right. I haven't exactly given you many reasons to trust me."

I shake my head and take a step toward her. "That isn't true. I didn't think that you were actually going to... *do* anything with him. And listen, I was worrying about the wrong thing. I was being selfish. If you want to meet up with him to talk then I want to go with you, make sure you're safe. I mean I won't listen in on your conversation, or anything, I can wait outside, as long as I'm there, in case-

"Pacifica," she says softly. "I went yesterday."

Despite all the talk about trust, and understanding, my heart falls slightly. "Oh."

"We met at a coffee shop down the street. My roommate, Amy, she came with me. She sat at a different table."

I shift my weight from foot to foot. "What did he say?"

"He said he was sorry. For everything. He started an anger management course while he was in prison and he's sticking with it while he's on probation. He, um, he asked me about you. Asked if we were seeing each other now. And I said no." Mabel stands up, steps forward, and picks up one of my hands. "And then I realized that I don't want that to be the case. Like, at all. Pacifica, you need to know that I'm done with him. Totally done with him, and I told him that to his face. I'm not going to see him again. *You* are the only person I wanna be with. You're the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning and the last thing I think about when I'm going to bed."

Wendy bursts open the door at the worst possible time. Mabel's hand falls out of mine as I spin around and shoot fury out of my eyes. "Can you give us a couple more minutes?"

The door isn't even fully closed before my arms are around Mabel's waist. She lets out a squeak but responds instantly when I bring my lips to hers, pressing back with so much force that it almost hurts. I fight back and she stumbles into the couch, her butt landing on the armrest. She pulls me up against her, locks me in place with her legs, giggles, and I want to smile back but I think I'm paranoid that this will end the way it always has, with one of us deciding that it's a bad idea to kiss each other, so I lean back in and kiss her, and kiss her again, until I'm convinced that neither of us think it's a bad idea at all.

Eventually she cups my face and gently pushes me away. My hands, heavy from exploring her hair, drop to my sides and I fall against her forehead. She grins and bites her lip. "I haven't showered," she says. "I'm all sweaty and gross."

"No," I murmur, kissing her neck, then her jaw. "You're beautiful. So beautiful, all the time."

"I think Wendy's waiting for us outside." She allows me one last drawn-out kiss, then wriggles out of my grip and moves to open the door. Into the hallway she says, "hey. You can come in now."

Wendy glances back and forth between us and smirks; it takes me a moment to straighten out my hair and roll down my shirt sleeve. "Are you guys good?" she asks.

The next few seconds turn into a Mexican standoff between our eyes, but Mabel eventually says, "yeah, we're good," so nonchalantly that it doesn't sound nonchalant at all.

I would thank Wendy for her intervention into our personal lives, if I didn't want to strangle the smugness out of her. She looks so proud of herself that you'd think she'd ended world hunger. Mabel and I probably could have reached this point ourselves, given a few more days of moping around in bed and refusing to call one another.

We end up spending most of the day with Wendy. Mabel showers and gets changed and we go out to lunch at a diner nearby. Wendy and I watch Mabel wolf down a stack of pancakes like a human vacuum cleaner - at one point she looks up, wipes away the syrup dribbling down her chin, and at the horror on our faces she mumbles that she hasn't had breakfast. Honestly, I'm not bothered. She could spit on the waitress or pee all over the table and I'd still find her adorable.

Afterwards, we hit the bowling alley. Wendy is irritatingly good at it, putting her upper-body strength to use, hurling the ball at breakneck speed and showing up the rest of the building. My strategy involves choosing the lightest ball I can find, designed for children, struggling to fit my fingers in the holes, and then dropping it onto the lane and blindly praying that it makes it all the way to the pins. Mabel doesn't even bother retaining her dignity - halfway through the game she drags over one of the ramps that you roll the ball down, and promptly gets told off by a member of staff because she isn't under twelve years old.

And while I do have a lot of fun hanging out, just the three of us, it's clear from the smiles that Mabel and I exchange in private that we have unfinished business waiting to be dealt with. I can say with certainty that had Wendy not been out in the hallway of Mabel's dorm, my hands would have been a lot less timid with Mabel's clothes.

At the same time, though, I'm glad that Wendy's here, acting as a barrier between us, because when Mabel discreetly pinches my butt and a thrum of excitement rushes through me, it dawns on me that, holy shit, as soon as Wendy taps out of her role of third wheel then there's nothing holding me back from Mabel and the night that I've fantasized about for a long, long time. And that's nerve-wracking, to say the least.

So when it gets to 5 P.M. and we've been lounging in my apartment for a couple of hours, and

Wendy says she ought to head home, I blurt out, "you could stay for dinner."

But she has work tonight, and she'll already have to put her foot down to make it there in time.

Wendy bear-hugs us both and Mabel and I stand side by side in the doorway, watching her get in her van. We wave, and just as she's about to pull out into the street she rolls her window down and shouts out, loudly enough for the whole building to hear, "don't go at it too hard!"

I stare at the van as it speeds out of sight, utterly mortified, but Mabel just laughs and says, "she's fun."

She steps back inside. I wait for my cheeks to return to a normal color and close the front door. Mabel stands a few feet in front of me, hands in her pockets.

Is this it? This is it. Already. Shit.

She shuffles her feet. "So..."

"So."

A chuckle. "We don't have to do this if you don't want to. I mean, we don't have to rush into anything."

"I do want to do this."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Okay then."

"Okay." I clear my throat and listen to the ear-piercing silence. What am I supposed to do now? Tear my clothes off and throw myself at her? "We should eat first."

"Definitely."

"I could... order pizza?"

"Sounds great."

So I flick on the TV and turn the volume up loud so I can't hear my heartbeat or my thoughts, I use the Domino's app to order a giant cheese pizza to share. It takes an agonizing forty minutes to get here. Mabel and I sit on opposite ends of the couch, and in those forty minutes, she gets up to go to the bathroom twice, which makes me wonder if she's freshening up somehow and whether I should be doing that too. During a commercial for Jack Daniel's, I realize I'm so nervous because I've rarely - if ever - done anything with a girl while sober. The craving for alcohol is far outweighed by the craving for the girl sitting next to me, though, which is unprecedented.

When the pizza does finally arrive I set the box down on my coffee table, along with two glasses of water from the kitchen. I make a conscious effort to sit closer to Mabel, and she notices and shuffles toward me, leaving about a foot between us. Still we don't talk. I make it through one slice of pizza before I feel bloated; Mabel does the same and puts the crust back into the box. With every passing minute that neither of us picks up another slice, the shock waves through my nerves increase in power, until I'm sure I'll totally ruin the mood by passing out.

Then comes a commercial break. I glance at Mabel out the corner of my eye then snap back to the

screen. A second later her arm has snaked around my neck and her palm is on my shoulder. I turn my head and her eyes tell me that we're thinking the same thing - that this cannot and will not wait any longer.

Our kisses are tender at first, treading water. I cup her cheek with my hand and savor every second, every trace of saliva, and heat, and affection, transferred from her lips to mine, every touch and every moment and every feeling that we've shared having lead to this, the proof of how much our love can withstand, a climax in our story.

Then I inch my body closer and our knees brush and it ignites something inside Mabel. She swings her leg over and straddles me, brings our hips together. I take the short opportunity to bask in the desire in her eyes, so honest and intense, like nobody has ever looked at me before. Her lip curls upwards in the faintest of smiles and we venture further, our kisses growing aggressive, our tongues touching and then dancing and then fighting. My hands creep under her shirt, latch onto her bare back, and her hips lurch forward so forcefully that I brace myself for the couch to collapse underneath us, the gap between our bodies infinitesimal.

Eventually, the credits roll on whatever reality show we weren't watching and another commercial break comes on and maybe it's the grating voice of the realtor on screen, or a sudden aversion to capitalism, but we force ourselves off the couch and cross the hallway to my bedroom like a tornado, barely able to keep our hands off each other, our outer clothes flinging in every possible direction, smacking the walls.

And then there's a sobering moment in my bedroom when I'm facing her, both of us in our bras and underwear, and she steps towards me and I remember so vividly how she looked on that night in Wendy's lake house, how she looked at me through the dark. I mistook it then for a drunken haze, glazed over her eyes, but it was more than that - it was fear. Fear for a reason I wouldn't know until the following morning, right before I would leave a handprint on her cheek. Fear for a reason that - several years later - would yield her a black bruise.

I smile knowing that her eyes now are in total contrast. They brim with love, safety, certainty. And as if reading my mind she sweeps a strand of hair behind my ear and whispers, "this isn't like the last time. This means so much more. This means everything to me."

I take her palm, press it to my cheek. "I know," I say, voice breaking.

And she unclasps her bra, then my own, gently lowers me onto the bed, and she shows me just how much this means, and afterwards I roll over, switch our positions, and I show her that all is forgiven and forgotten. All of the memories from that last summer float away from us, balloons that will never be burst but will no longer weigh us down. I show Mabel how in love with her I am, and just in case it isn't obvious enough, I kiss her neck and whisper it in her ear.

When we've both released our shudders of pleasure we fall into the sheets and tangle up our limbs, hot, heavy breaths invading the air, and the occasional giggle from the bottoms of our hearts.

I don't know how much time passes like that, transfixed on the ceiling, Mabel's hands on my stomach and my legs threaded through hers. She rolls her head toward me and breathes, "that was the most fun I've ever had in my life. And I've been to Disney World."

I laugh. A light, melodic sound that I wouldn't identify as my own voice if it was played back to me. "I feel like I could lie here forever. Lie here forever and think about what just happened."

I see her prop her head up on her elbow and I turn to look at her. "What, instead of just... doing it again?"

"Oh, we're gonna do it again," I say, weaving my fingers between hers. "It would be an injustice not to."

"We're going to do that *lots* of times." She ducks her head and plants a long kiss on my lips. "I love you," she murmurs.

"I love you too."

For an hour we talk about mundane things that seem enthralling now that we're... an item? Girlfriends? I turn and gaze at her lips, dancing up and down as she tells me stories about the school she volunteers at. Mabel Pines. Girlfriend. It sounds so, so bizarre but so, so right.

At some point she falls asleep on my bare chest. I lie awake and stroke her hair, curl it around my fingers, her breath tickling my neck. In my serene state I also succumb to sleep, content in the knowledge that with Mabel at my side, I will never run out of reasons to be happy.

I wake up unnaturally early the next morning, and Mabel's absence from the bed makes me panic for all of a second, before I hear her humming to herself somewhere in the apartment.

It's 6 A.M. and a pale orange light spills through the gap in the curtains. I heave myself out of bed and put on a fresh pair of underwear and yesterday's shirt - not patient enough to put on pants.

She's in the kitchen with her back to the door, cooking something on the stove, wearing one of my black t-shirts and her shorts, her hair damp. I lean on the doorframe and watch her butt jiggle from side to side as she hums a tune, and a huge, perverted grin breaks out on my face because I don't even need to be subtle about my ogling anymore.

She turns to grab something from the counter behind her and jumps, puts a hand on her chest. "Oh! You scared me. I was just about to bring you breakfast."

"What are you making?"

She lifts a frying pan off the stove and holds it up. It's four slices of pizza, side by side.

I frown. "I think I'll stick to granola. Thank you, though."

She shrugs and picks one of the slices out of the pan, takes a bite.

I rub my eyes and groan at the onslaught of light through the kitchen window. "I don't think I've ever seen this hour of the morning."

"We fell asleep really early," Mabel says, halfway through chewing. "I got up two hours ago." She wanders to the door and kisses me. I can smell my soap and shampoo on her. "Good morning."

My arms settle around her waist. "Morning."

"We had sex last night."

"We did."

"It was kinda awesome."

"It was. What are we going to do today?"

Her fingers play with the hem of my shirt. "I have class at nine. And another at eleven. Then I'm at the school this afternoon."

"Class at 9 A.M. on a Monday? That sounds very skippable."

She jabs me in the chest. "I'm not going to ruin my perfect attendance record, thank you very much. Are you gonna be a bad influence on me?"

"Hey, you're the bad influence. If I keep waking up this early I might, like, die." I kiss her quickly and wriggle out of her arms. "I'm gonna take a shower," I say, leaning on the doorframe again. "You're welcome to join me."

Chapter End Notes

Next week will be the last chapter. Thank you for reading this far!

Twenty-Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

TWO YEARS LATER

Stanley Pines dies on the 15th of January, 2023. Unexpectedly, of a heart attack, in the bar where I used to play piano, where I developed a crush on my now-girlfriend, and where I met my friend Nina.

We're celebrating our two-year anniversary when Mabel gets the call from her mom. She frowns and then her expression turns to nothing, the permanent pinkness in her cheeks goes pale. A group at a nearby table laugh loudly and she plugs her ear with her finger. She says one word into the receiver - "okay."

Then she puts down the phone without hanging up and looks at me, so much life drained from her face. "Stan died," she mumbles, and then she stands and strides to the bathroom with overstated composure.

For a minute I have no idea what to do. Normally when Mabel flees from my company it's because I've said something stupid and become the last person she wants to speak to for an hour or two.

It's the second time she has lost a great uncle with no forewarning. We stayed at the Mystery Shack for two weeks in the summer and Stan was his usual lively, bitter self, cooking all of our meals, cracking moderately offensive jokes, fishing by day and hosting poker games by night. But then I venture a little further into the memory and Stan's diet wasn't great. A lot of meat and a huge fuss when Mabel served peas. I remember coming downstairs at 1 A.M. to get a glass of water and he was smoking cigars with his friends around the poker table. The coughing through the floorboards. Perhaps his habits had gotten the better of him.

But he was only sixty-three, and Ford was sixty. My slightly maniacal thought as I meander to the bathroom is that I hope early deaths don't run in the family.

Only one stall is occupied. Piano music plays from a speaker above the sink. I tap gently on the door. "Mabel? Baby, can you let me in?"

Nothing happens for a few seconds, but then I hear the fabric of her dress rustling and the lock turns from red to white. I slip into the space that struggles to fit the two of us, and lock the door behind me.

She's sat still on the toilet seat, and she doesn't look up so I crouch into her line of sight, take her hands, and that's all the contact she needed to break down. The sobs come in thrashing waves and reverberate from the tiled walls of the bathroom. My arms encircle her back, she cries into my neck, and as hard as it is to support our weight with just my feet, I will stay like this for as long as she needs, because the roles have been reversed dozens of times and I owe it to her to be her anchor.

She gets in the car while I pay the check, which turns into a real commotion because they've tried to charge us \$47.50 for a Diet Coke, and it takes a lot of my patience to explain to the waiter that that clearly isn't right, unless they're using the vending machine in the Mystery Shack as a price guide.

In the Jeep, I lean over the console, kiss Mabel's cheek, and hold her hand all the way back to our apartment. Dipper is at the front door within twenty minutes and I let him take over as Mabel's couch cushion for the night, knowing that nothing I have learned in two years as a girlfriend can comfort her as much as her twin, though she would deny that if I said it out loud. A black and white movie plays on the TV, we don't change the channel, and it's 1 A.M. when Dipper nudges my foot to wake me up.

"She's fast asleep," he says, gesturing to his sister, balled up on the couch.

I push myself out of the armchair and stretch. "I'll carry her."

Dipper grabs his coat from the hook on the front door.

"Where are you going?" I say. "Call your girl and tell her you're staying here."

He's visibly hesitant. I've met his girlfriend and she definitely wears the pants in their relationship, but if she has anything to say about him spending time with his sister right now then my fist is going to need a chat with her face.

"Alright," he says, and hangs his coat back up.

"I'll move this lump out the way and then I'll get the spare sheets."

"Thanks."

Once I've brushed my teeth, I climb into bed next to Mabel. She's facing the wall so I turn out the light without saying anything, but then her hand finds mine and she rolls over. I shuffle closer so I can make out her eyes in the dark, and lift a palm to stroke her freckled cheek.

"Hey," she murmurs.

"Hey."

"Dipper's staying?"

"Mhmm."

"My mom's been texting me. She's going to try and arrange the funeral for the end of next week. Are you gonna be able to get time off work?"

"Yeah, of course." And if I can't, I'll quit and find a job elsewhere, which has become a bad habit of mine in the last couple of years. But I kind of like hopping from island to island, sampling all walks of life in the hopes of finding a purpose.

"Mom wants us all to stay in the Shack. The family. But I don't know if I want to. I can't imagine living among all of his things, when he's..."

"I know. My mom will let us both stay if you really don't want to. But I think you should. You should be around family."

She thinks it over for a moment, her shallow breaths tickling my chin, then shimmies forward and kisses me softly. "Our anniversary is kinda ruined," she whispers.

"We'll change the date."

A faint smirk plays on her lips. "I don't think that's how anniversaries work."

"For normal couples it isn't. For *boring* couples. But we're not a normal couple."

She hums and chuckles at the same time. "Mm. I forgot about that. We're a hot power-couple."

"The *hottest*."

She leans in for two more kisses, I steal a third, and then she lets her head sink into a pillow and shuts her eyes. Somewhere in my hazy minutes of drifting to sleep, I hear her ask me, "why do people have to leave before we've had a chance to say goodbye?"

And I have no answer, obviously. Nobody does. Mabel falls asleep and I cling to her body while a restless hour passes, attacking my mind with thoughts of my dad, and Ford, and Stan. The question itself was oversimplified. How often are we lucky enough that the only thing left unsaid is *goodbye*?

Most people wouldn't consider light rain to be apt weather for a funeral, but it's perfect for Stan. Rain was one of the very few things that brought out the sentimental side of him. One morning, years and years ago, I sat next to him on the porch of the Shack, listening to the pitter-patter, and he told me that the rain reminded him of his short time in a dingy apartment in Philadelphia, not long after being kicked out of his home. He had a tiny balcony overlooking a busy street and he'd sit out there in the rain for hours; it helped him think. It was the most Stan had ever told me about his personal life, and he said he was eternally grateful that that one era of it was long over.

That was the memory I shared with Mabel on our drive up to Gravity Falls. Now, I stand in the attic - her old bedroom, with the two beds still in place - and gaze out the triangular window at the rain blanketing the pine trees, while Mabel changes into her black dress.

"Okay," Mabel says from behind me, but I'm stuck in a trance. "Honey?"

"Mm," I say, pivoting on my high heels.

She points a thumb at her back. "Can you zippy-dee zip me up?"

After I've done it, she asks me if I'm okay.

"I should be asking you that question," I say, tucking her hair behind her shoulder and cupping her cheek.

"Well, I'm asking you."

"I'm fine. How are you feeling?"

She breathes heavily, takes a while to respond. "Like somebody's footing my internal organs."

Despite having known Mabel for a long, long time, and having been her most intimate confidant in the last two years, there are some things she says that I simply cannot decipher the meaning of, and I have learned that asking her to repeat or explain herself is usually counterproductive. Asking her to do that before her uncle's funeral would just be inappropriate.

"Oh, sweetheart," I say. "That doesn't sound nice."

"Yeah," she sighs. She stares at the floor and picks at a fingernail. "I think I'm ready, though. Just, um... I'm gonna take a few minutes up here, if that's okay."

"Of course. I'll see you very, very soon, okay?"

She nods, and leaves me with a slow, soft kiss. "I love you."

"I love you too."

The stairs creak under my feet, the house alive with its characteristic sounds, even if its owner is not. Mr. and Mrs. Pines sit at the table against the back wall of the living room. Dipper slips away from his girlfriend and joins me in the entryway, looking very spruce, except for the crooked tie. I tut and reach out to straighten it, but he swats my hand away and cocks his head.

"Hey," he says. "Stan wore them like this."

I smirk. "Really, Dipper? Using your late uncle as an excuse to dress like a slob?"

He grins but sobers quickly, nods at the stairs. "How is she?"

"She's okay. Should be down in a few minutes."

"Thank you. For looking after her these last few days."

I lift a shoulder. "Kinda my job."

"Hey," he says, reaching into the pocket of his jacket. He retrieves a folded slip of notepaper, and I already know what he's going to say. "Can you read the second-"

"No, Dipper. I'm not going to help you on your fifty-third draft, one hour before the service. Whatever you've written is going to be beyond perfect, I assure you."

He pockets the paper and exhales. "Okay."

"You got this," I tell him.

"I got this."

I punch my own palm. "You've *got* this."

"I've got this!" he shouts, startling Marie and his parents. He apologizes to the room, then faces me again. "You the best."

"*You* the best." I wrap him up in a hug, then wander to the table and hug his mom, nod politely to his dad. On my way out I touch Marie's forearm and smile. I don't know her well at all - only from our double dates with the twins - but it felt like the right thing to do.

The van's engine rumbles at the far end of the parking lot, and the rain is still falling. I wave frantically from the porch, trying to get Wendy's attention, but her eyes are set on her lap, and I can see her phone screen shining on her pale face.

"Freaking idiot," I mutter, eyeing the soggy mud at the foot of the porch steps. "You're an idiot."

I run as fast as heels allow across the lot and clamber into the passenger seat. Only then does Wendy look up, and thankfully my anger dissolves at the sight of her. "Oh my god," I say. "You look amazing?"

She frowns. "Thank you? But why was that a question?"

"Because I wasn't expecting you to wear a dress? But seriously, you look incredible."

"Thank you. So do you. Your hair's a little damp, though."

"Don't. Do not, or I am going to slap you. You couldn't have parked a little closer to the- you know what? Doesn't matter." I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth, just like Mabel taught me. "No fighting today. Only love."

"Yay," she says, leaning over the console to hug me. "Those are my favorite kind of days."

Wendy puts her phone away but keeps the van in neutral, and her eyes on the door of the Shack, her fingertips drumming on the wheel.

I frown at her. "You saw him yesterday, right?"

"Yeah," she says, but her voice is so far away that I'm not sure she listened to the question.

"Wendy. You'd better not be thinking of doing anything dramatic."

She snaps her attention to me and glowers. "I wouldn't dare. It's his uncle's fucking funeral, P."

"Okay, okay. Sorry. Just, you know, you've been known to proclaim your love for people at inopportune times."

"Yeah, okay. Nice to know you think so highly of me." She continues to stare at the door. "I just want to know what she looks like."

A black car pulls into the lot and stops in front of the porch. They file out the door one by one - the mother, the father, my girlfriend, the subject of Wendy's intermittent affection, and lastly, the subject of Wendy's intermittent jealousy. Marie wears a tight-fitting, sleeveless black dress, her short hair matching the color and following the contours of her neck. The full tattoo on her left arm is on display.

Dipper is the only one to stop and notice the van. He holds the car door open for Marie, then holds up his middle finger in our direction. Wendy laughs and sends one right back at him, and he grins, then he ducks into the car and it pulls out of the lot.

"Just as I expected," Wendy murmurs. "She is a beautiful badass."

"Yeah, she's pretty cool."

"P. I'm trying to hurt over here."

"You had your chance with him."

"I know, I know. God, you need to stop saying that." At last, the van trundles forward over the uneven surface of the lot. "Your girl looks smoking hot, by the way."

"Oh, my god," I sigh. "So inappropriate."

The first half of the service takes place in the church. The urn, placed on a wooden stand before the altar, contains all that is left of Stan's physical form, and I find that almost as nauseating as seeing a coffin lowered into the dirt.

Dipper's eulogy tells stories of Stan's life both before and after he knew him; his years as a traveling salesman, his stint as the manager of the bizarre tourist trap across town - the Stan we all knew the best - and then Dipper talks about the remaining few quiet years, when the river of customers had become a stream, and Stan would pack himself a sandwich and a couple of beers and leave the Shack for the whole day, fishing from his boat out on the lake until the sun set behind the trees up the top of the tall cliffs.

Dipper is calm, unwavering. He doesn't shed a tear. Mabel, however, I watch from where I'm sitting, three rows behind her, watch her shoulders shudder and her head dip, silencing her sobs. Her mom's hand rubs her back but it isn't enough, damn the formalities, I want to hop over the pews and hug my girlfriend. I don't, obviously.

After the service, Mabel waits in the aisle for me and says nothing, but holds my hand as we exit the church. The congregation becomes a procession through town, past the businesses on Main Street, along the road, and through the passage between the trees leading to the shoreline of the lake. There are two small rowing boats waiting, motionless in the water, the lake calm, the rain and the wind having stopped while we were inside. We gather round and Mabel lets go of my hand, steps into a boat while Dipper steps into the other. They begin to row, side by side, as thirty-odd mourners, clad in black, stand on the shore, watching them go. Maybe two hundred feet out they stop, and begin to talk, their heads tilted to the water below them. I can't hear what they're saying, but it isn't for me to hear. It's between them and Stan - the twins were his closest friends. When I hear Wendy snuffle beside me, I link my arm with hers. Mabel leans over the side of her boat, lifts the urn, and pours Stan's ashes into the water.

We all walk over to the diner, after that. Lindsay closed it for the day but opens up for us, now, the counter transformed into a buffet and a makeshift bar set up at the end of the room, by the jukebox. Over the speakers, a Mazzy Star CD is playing - Stan's guilty pleasure. After twenty minutes or so Mabel strays from my side to talk to a circle of friends from the Sherville Factory, and I go stand by the buffet and shovel Doritos down my throat like they're my final meal. Dipper is talking to his parents and two other people I don't recognize, and Wendy is talking to Marie, which is worrying until I notice that they're getting along fine.

Lindsay squeezes my shoulder from behind and smiles, leans on the other side of the counter. She has traded out the blue Greasy's uniform for a black blouse and a gray skirt, a dish towel tucked into one of the belt loops.

"I miss it here," I tell her, unaware that I miss it here until I say it out loud.

"You also love Sacramento," she reminds me.

"Yeah, but I mean here specifically. Greasy's. Denny's doesn't have any character compared to this."

"Well, my offer always stands. I have two positions open if you girls find yourself back in my neck of the woods."

"No offense, but that would feel kind of like moving backwards. I mean, I was supposed to move to California to figure out who I wanted to be, right? So far I've figured out how to make fifty dollars every six months playing piano, and how to convince my mom to pay my half of the rent when I've eaten out three nights in a row. Besides, I wouldn't tear Mabel away from the school."

"How did she handle everything today?"

"She did well. She cried in the church but after that we went out to the lake to scatter Stan's ashes."

She handled that by herself. She's very brave."

"She is. And, um... I'm guessing you haven't heard anything from her ex-boyfriend?"

"Nope. No idea what happened to him."

"Hopefully not causing anybody pain elsewhere."

"Mhmm. It's best not to think about that."

"Look who's here," Lindsay says, and I glance over at the door and Nina is walking in with Kyle.

"Bless them. Did they come all the way from Portland?"

Nina spots us and comes over, boyfriend in tow, and gives me the briefest of hugs before running off to pay her respects to Mabel's entire family, while Kyle hovers over my shoulder.

"Hey, Kyle."

"Hey. Oh, shit, are those carrot sticks?" he says, and charges toward the other end of the buffet.

"Good talk."

That night, my mom cooks us pasta and we watch *Family Feud* in the living room. Mom sits in Dad's old armchair and continually glances over at Mabel and I on the couch, under a blanket in our default positions, her head on my shoulder, my arm around her, and Spark lying on our feet. Mom isn't a voyeur; I know that she simply enjoys seeing her daughter happy, and in love, but it's incredibly embarrassing, even if Mabel never notices. Tonight, I glare at her over the top of Mabel's head, but she doesn't wipe the goofy grin off her face.

"Do you two sit like that at home?" she says.

Mabel looks across at her and then up at me, like the question didn't make any sense.

"Yes," I say.

"I bet you don't keep your hands above the blanket at home. I remember when I was your age, me and Pacifica's father would sit down and watch a film and even while his parents were in the room, we couldn't keep our hands off each-"

"Right," I say to Mabel. "Let's take Spark for that walk, shall we?"

The sky is clear, granting us enough light to see when the street lights end and we enter the dark outskirts of town, hand in hand, Spark running ahead and sniffing every patch of dirt so we don't have to. We come to the perimeter of the lake, the moon reflecting off its surface, and we walk into the woods and around to the old fishing dock, fighting through the overgrowth. We sit down on the rugged wooden planks, our backs up against one post, which isn't entirely comfortable but it's the only way to cuddle up together without lying down and coating our hair in dirt. Mabel has been anxious all day, fiddling with the hem of her dress or chewing the ends of her hair, but now she rests her head on my shoulder again, her hands around my arm, and sits as still as the lake.

"We should find a boyfriend for your mom," she says, and yawns. "Ooh, or a girlfriend. Then you could say that your whole family are lesbians. That would be awesome."

"Why exactly would that be awesome?"

Spark barks at the end of the dock, staring at the water, as uncertain about jumping in as he always is.

"See? Spark thinks it would be cool, too."

"Spark, go swim," I tell him.

"He wants you to go in first. We've confused him, coming up here in January. It isn't summer, Sparky! The water's freezing."

Spark wanders over and lies against the post opposite us, with a whimper of defeat.

"You remember that night we fell asleep here?" Mabel says. "Years and years ago. I remember we woke up, and I got into the water and convinced you to come in too. When you jumped in the water, that was the first time I ever had feelings for a girl."

"What? You're a liar."

"No I'm not. You were sitting on the end of the dock, in your bra and underwear, and I wanted to reach out and touch your belly. I don't touch girls' bare bellies."

"There's no way you had any feelings for me back then. You were obsessed with boys."

"That's how I've always been, though. I mean, I still kinda am. My celebrity pass is Kit Harington."

I tut and fold my arms. "Mabel. Come on. I hate it when you say stuff like that."

"Like what?"

"When you say you're crazy about guys. It makes me feel anxious, like you're one step away from becoming straight."

She groans and wraps her arms around my neck, kisses my cheek. "Honey, no, no, no. How many times have I told you? As long as you're around I could never be straight."

"But it makes me feel like I can't... *treat* you properly, 'cause I don't have any... you know, boy parts."

"I don't need boy parts. If I could come home to a thousand oiled up Kit Harington clones or come home to you, I'd pick you every time."

"But you're still *thinking* about sleeping with a thousand Kit Haringtons."

"Oh, and I suppose *you* never think about sleeping with a thousand Emma Watsons."

"Of course I don't, Mabel. A thousand is too many. I'd take a hundred, at most."

She grins and presses her nose against my cheek. "I bet I can do things to you that Emma Watson couldn't," she whispers.

"Oh yeah? What kind of things?"

"You'll have to wait till we're back in Sacramento, because I'm *not* showing you in your mom's house."

I laugh and we kiss for a minute, until we're tired of our hair slipping into our mouths.

Mabel rolls her eyes. "What's rule number one about making out?"

"Always bring hair ties. But that's your job."

"I know. I didn't bring any. I didn't know this was that kind of walk."

"How come you never told me about any of that before? About wanting to... touch my belly and stuff when we were fourteen."

She shrugs. "You never asked."

"Oh, right, okay. You can talk for two hours about your last appointment at the hair salon unprompted, but if I want to know about the important stuff I have to ask first."

Her eyes flash with dejection in the dim light of the moon. "You don't think my haircuts are important?"

"Baby, everything you say is important to me. But some things are... less interesting than other things."

"So in the last five minutes you've called me a liar and now you're calling me boring. This is shaping up to be some night."

"I'm a bad girlfriend."

"The worst." Mabel grins, lays her legs across my lap, and kisses me again. "I don't want to stop coming here over the summer. Even though Stan is gone."

I nod, my forehead bumping hers. "Okay. I assumed we would anyway. We could stay with my mom if you didn't want to stay in the Shack."

"Yeah. Or maybe we could do, like, half and half. I could see if Dipper and Marie wanted to come up in the same week as us, so the Shack is less lonely."

"Okay."

"And I wanna sleep out here on the docks again one night this summer. Relive our youth."

"Mm, way out here with nobody else around?" I duck my head and kiss her neck. "We could do a whole lot more than sleep."

"I don't know, that might be weird." She tipped her head in the direction of the lake. "My uncle's right over there."

"Right. Yeah. Fair point."

On our last day in Gravity Falls, Wendy drives us up to her dad's lake house to spend the night. She navigates the dirt trail like a coked up rally driver, as per usual, and Marie, riding shotgun, clutches onto the grab handle for her life while myself and the twins jerk from side to side in the back seats of the van, Spark sliding between our laps. Dipper volunteered to take the middle seat - the only one without a safety belt - so if Wendy brakes suddenly, he's the valiant soul who will be rocketed through the windshield. Although, as an unfortunate squirrel discovered half a mile back, Wendy brakes for nobody.

Wendy mentions the forecast of snow and Mabel is enthralled at the prospect of being snowed in at the lake house, spending another couple of nights there, sitting in the hot tub where winter can't touch her, but I gaze out the window at the trees whizzing past and I can't help thinking back to the last time I was headed up this road to the lake house, the day that Mabel left without saying goodbye. Wendy drove slower that day, as if afraid a sudden jolt of the van would shatter my fragile heart.

Mabel says, "Wendy, Marie hasn't been initiated into van karaoke."

"You still got an iPhone?" Wendy unreels a long cable sticking out of the dashboard and throws it over to the back seat, and Mabel plugs her phone into it.

Dipper groans. "Not van karaoke. Anything but van karaoke."

"What's van karaoke?" Marie asks, as the first lines of *Don't Stop Me Now* filter through the speakers.

"Not Queen," Dipper says. "Anything but Queen."

"We go around in a circle singing a line of the song," Mabel says, "except you actually sing two lines because two people are singing at once. So, like, you would have to sing with Wendy and then with Pacifica and then you'd wait for Wendy again."

"You can skip over me," Dipper says.

"Dipper! There's no skipping in van karaoke. Except for Spark, because he's a dog."

"I wanna hear you sing, Dip," Marie says, turned around in her seat.

"Trust me," he says, "you don't."

"If you don't want to play, you can get out of the car and walk the rest of the way," Mabel says.

"That sounds a little extreme, don't you think?"

Wendy brakes and I have to grab Dipper's arm to keep him from lurching forward. The van comes to a stop. Wendy turns around, blows hair out of her face, and says, "you can get out or I'll throw you out."

"What?"

"You heard your sister. There's no skipping in van karaoke."

"Jesus Christ, fine, I'll play. But this is peer pressure and bullying and I'm gonna tell on you guys to my mom."

By the time I've had more than enough of Queen's best hits, the van pulls up at the side of the lake house and I jump out onto the grass and drink the fresh air. It's cloudy, so the lake is less blue and less impressive than I remember it, and the house has aged six years and been worn down by the elements, its once golden-brown porch now more of an oatmeal-gray. But Wendy runs up the front steps, unlocks the door, and turns the lights on in the living room, a yellow glow cast out into the fading daylight, and it does look like a cozy place to spend a winter evening, so I smile and follow everyone else inside.

We cook up some of the party food we brought with us, pile it up in bowls and scatter them around

the furniture in the living room, and then we all lounge around for hours, talking, reminiscing, while it turns dark outside, Wendy and Dipper guzzling beer, Mabel getting hyper on Coca-Cola, Marie and I sticking to water. Wendy disappears upstairs and comes back carrying a stack of board games, which produce a cloud of dust when she sets them down on the coffee table, and we pick out a game called *Other Halves*, in which couples answer questions about each other and score points based on how many they get right. Wendy reads the questions from a card and Dipper and Marie stand back to back in the middle of the room, writing their answers on whiteboards with marker pens and then revealing them to everyone else. Marie is doing well - Dipper, not so much.

"You didn't even get the month right!" Marie says to him.

"I could have sworn we got together on Valentine's Day."

"You gave me that letter on Valentine's Day."

"Yeah, and I thought that was what sealed the deal."

"No, we didn't start dating until a month later, when I crashed my car into that telegraph pole and you drove out in the rain to come and get me. That kiss was *unforgettable*! Or so I thought. Clearly you didn't feel the same."

"Babe, hold on. Obviously I'm remembering it all wrong because I was so in love with you on Valentine's Day that I just assumed we were already together back then."

"Yeah, okay. Nice try, smooth talker."

"Guys," Wendy says, holding in her laughter. "You get one point because Marie got it right. This is the last question in this round. You ready?" She reads from the card, "what kind of sandwich would you make for your partner if they needed comforting?"

"Roast beef," Mabel says, while I massage her feet in my lap.

"Yes," Wendy says, "but once again, Mabel, you and Pacifica are not playing yet, so kindly shut your mouth."

"I've got mine," Dipper says, holding his board to his chest.

"Shit," Marie mutters, and taps her marker pen against her chin. "I don't know. He usually just goes to the fridge and stuffs whatever crap he can find in his sandwich."

"Five seconds," Wendy says.

Marie shakes her head and scribbles something down on the board. They reveal their answers and Dipper's guess of peanut butter is correct, but Marie's guess of ham and cheese is not.

"Oh, oh," Mabel says, flinging her hand in the air. "Can I guess?"

"Yes, but you don't get any points."

"Cold turkey. He eats that, like, five days in a row after Thanksgiving."

Dipper shakes his head.

"What? You're lying."

"I think I might know it," Wendy says. "Melted marshmallows, right?"

Dipper grins and points his pen at her. "That's the one."

"*Melted marshmallows?*" Marie says. "You can't put that in a sandwich!"

"Wendy's the one who introduced me to marshmallow sandwiches. I admit it sounds gross, but you have to try it to understand."

There's a short silence as Marie and Dipper sit down, and Marie noticing the grin on Wendy's face - proud that she knew something about Dipper that his twin sister and girlfriend did not - is the only awkward thing that has happened since we arrived, so I throw Mabel's feet off my lap, stand up, and declare that it is our turn to play.

"Okay," Wendy says. "Dipper and Marie, you guys scored six out of ten. Not bad at all."

Marie says, "and how many of those points came from me?"

"You scored four, Dipper scored two."

"That's hardly relevant, is it?" Dipper lies back on the couch and sticks his foot under Marie's nose. "It's a *team* game. We're a *team*."

Mabel clutches onto my arm in the center of the room and kisses my cheek. "Pacifica, if we lose I'm breaking up with you."

Wendy draws another card from the box and says, "alright, your first question is: What nickname does your partner prefer to be called by?"

I scribble *Mabey* on the board and we say "done," in unison. I turn around and show Mabel the board and she points and says, "yes! That's it, but she never freaking calls me it."

"Because it sounds so cheesy."

"It's cute, and I like it so you should call me it."

"Is Mabel's answer right?" Wendy asks me.

"Yep." She wrote *NO NICKNAMES*, with a sad face underneath.

"She doesn't like nicknames," Mabel says. "But even if she did, I'd use her full name all the time 'cause it's too pretty. *Pacifica*."

"Stop," I whisper, and tug her sweater.

"What?"

"If you keep purring my name like that I'm not gonna be able to keep my hands off you."

"Ooh." She grins and wraps her arms around my waist.

"Backs to each other, please," Wendy says. "Question two: In what year was your partner first attracted to you?"

"Shoot," Mabel says. "Pacifica, what year were you first attracted to me?"

"What?" Dipper says. "That's gotta be against the rules."

"Yeah, I'm joking, Dipper."

I think back to our talk on the fishing dock last night and count back the years to when Mabel was fourteen - 2014. Mabel writes *2013* and I point to it and say, "technically that's right, but I didn't know at the time that I was attracted to her. It took me a while to figure it out."

"Then you don't get a point," Dipper says.

"Well, no, hold on," Mabel says. "Pacifica has told me before that she liked me when we were thirteen."

"You were thirteen. I was fourteen."

"Okay, so, imagine me when I was thirteen and tell me if you find me attractive."

I wince. "That's kinda weird, Mabel."

"You told me before that when I used to come see you singing in the bar, that's when you got a crush on me."

"Right, but I didn't know back then that it was a crush."

"So Mabel got it wrong," Dipper says. "The right answer would be whatever year Pacifica *realized* she had a crush on her."

Mabel plants her hands on her hips. "Dipper, I hope you're not trivializing the struggles Pacifica went through to determine her sexuality."

"That's obviously not what I'm doing."

"Let them have the point," Marie says, slapping Dipper's leg. "They clearly know more than the question even asked them."

Mabel curtsies. "Thank you, Marie."

"Okay," Wendy says, "and was Pacifica's answer right?"

"Yes," Mabel says. "I mean, you should see this girl in her bra and panties."

"Oh my god," I say, "please stop."

"Question three-"

"Wait," Dipper says. "Make them say the answer to the question before they see each other's boards."

"We said we weren't gonna play it like that because we trust each other."

"Yeah, but I just realized I don't trust Mabel."

Mabel pokes her tongue out. "Fine. We're still gonna win."

"Question three: What can you do that will always make your partner laugh?"

We both write down an answer, and Wendy asks me what Mabel can do that always makes me laugh. "Dipper, you're gonna hate me for this," I say. "But she does a really funny impression of

you."

Mabel flips her board around to reveal *Dipper impression!* and grins.

Wendy says, "okay, well now we all need to see her Dipper impression."

"Sling me your hat, bro," she says, and Dipper sighs and throws his cap across the room. Mabel puts it on her head and pulls the bill down past her eyes and says in a deep voice, "Hey guys, this is a pretty underground conspiracy right now, so keep it on the down-low, but I'm starting to think that JFK's assassin-" She whispers, "was a ghost."

Everyone laughs except for Dipper. "I don't sound anything like that," he says.

"You do a little bit," Wendy says. "Mabel, what's your answer?"

Mabel narrows her eyes at me and hums in thought. "I'm very ticklish."

I grin and flip the board around to reveal *Tickling her*, and I reach out for a high-five but she backs up a step and covers her ribs like I'm about to tickle her.

"Alright," Wendy says, "two points again. Question four: What is your partner's dream vacation spot?"

I write down *Disney World* and Mabel confirms it out loud, but then I give my answer - Hawaii - and Mabel's board says *Anywhere with me!*

"What?" I say. "You know I've always wanted to go to Hawaii. Why would you put *that* as an answer?"

"I thought that's what you were going to say!"

"Why would I give a bullshit answer like that instead of saying the one place that I'm *always* talking about?"

"Because this is a couples' game! Sorry for trying to bring a little bit of romance into it."

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was supposed to read your mind at the start of every round."

"Guys," Wendy says, laughing. "Chill out. You still have seven out of eight points. You're in the lead."

"Any other pointless curveballs you're gonna throw at me for this round, Mabel?" I say, as she pinches my stomach.

"Question five, last one: Where did you go on your first date?"

I have to think harder about that, because the answer isn't exactly clear, but I think back to two years ago and write down *Caprazzio's*, the Italian restaurant I met Mabel at on the day I first moved to Sacramento. Wendy tells us to turn our boards around and when Mabel sees we wrote the same thing, she gasps and hooks her arm through mine. "You remembered!" she says.

"Of course I remember. It wasn't exactly the smoothest of first dates."

"Yeah, but, the cute thing is," she says, addressing the room, "we agreed before we went there that it wasn't a date. We were just going as friends."

"But we both secretly knew it was a date," I say, and she grins and kisses me a few times in front of everyone.

Marie holds her hand up to her chest and says, "you guys are so perfect together."

"Almost perfect," I say. "We got nine points out of ten."

The game goes on for a few more rounds, the twins' bickering eventually severe enough for Wendy to call the game, but within minutes they're throwing cheese puffs at each other and laughing. We switch on the TV and Wendy channel-surfs until the opening scene of *Up* comes on. Mabel puts her head on my shoulder and halfway through the movie I look up to find that the other three have fallen asleep, and I would join them, but Mabel likes to nudge me every now and again and whisper facts about the movie from the behind-the-scenes feature she has on DVD.

She goes to stand and asks me if I want a drink, but she's clearly as invested in the film as when she first saw it, so I get up and go to the kitchen for her. I take a glass from one of the cabinets and with the lights off, I can see clearly enough in the dark, out the window over the sink, to notice that the front lawn has turned white. I set the glass down and go over to the front door, switch on the porch light, and through the living room window I see that thick snowflakes are still falling, building up on the railing surrounding the porch. I smile and wave Mabel over to the window, and she tiptoes across the living room and gasps at the sight. "Oh my gosh," she whispers.

"If it keeps falling like that we might get stuck here after all."

She hurries over to the door and takes her coat off the hooks.

"Mabel, it's gonna be freezing out there."

"Pacifica, it's *snowing*. I don't care if it's negative a hundred. Are you coming?"

I seriously consider leaving her to it and returning to the warmth of the couch, but when she makes those eyes at me I could follow her into a burning building, so I grab my coat and follow her outside. We shut the door behind us and she jumps off the porch steps, walks out into the yard, gazing up at the black sky in wonder, her sneakers leaving inch-high prints in the snow. I follow her steps, but she soon gets tired of catching the flakes on her tongue and she runs down to the table and chairs by the water. I stand in the yard and look back at the cabin, the light from the TV casting glimpses of color through the living room window, an even layer of snow rising on the roof.

Then in my mind's eye it's summer, and a tent is sitting at the foot of the steps to the left of the house, and then my gaze drifts to the hot tub on the porch, and finally up to the window of the bedroom where we slept together for the first time. A snowball pelts me in the back and I turn and Mabel's walking back up the lawn, toward me, a huge smile on her face that fades away when she notices the solemn look on mine.

"What's wrong?" she says, coming closer, her nose and her cheeks equally pink.

"Nothing," I say, and withdraw my hands from my pockets to hold hers. "It just feels weird to be back here. All those memories."

She looks over my shoulder, up at the house, and nods. "Yeah." A tiny smile tugs at the corner of her mouth and she kisses me, and because her breath is warm I bring my hands to her cheeks and kiss her again, locking us in the heat for a minute or two. When we pull away, Mabel starts back toward the cabin and holds out her hand to me. "How about we make some new ones?"

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's over. I have a lot to say about the last 125,000 words, but I'll try to keep this brief. This is the first novel-length story I've ever finished, so forgive me if I'm a bit too sentimental!

I would sincerely like to thank everyone who read this far, and I'd like to give a special thank you to everyone who left kudos or a comment. Nobody in my personal life knows that I've taken an interest in writing, so you guys are the only ones who keep me motivated other than myself. Shout-out to these lovely people, who left comments on multiple occasions: Wendipfan42, mintyrest, Fibzki, Send_noods, The_Fanfic_Mormon, Xarius_The_Mad, mintyleaves (go read their story Stargaze if you're looking for more cute Mabifica), HitlerSpines, and Trashibesensei. I think I've said this before, but you commenters have no idea how kind you are – on occasion, your comments have quite literally made my day. If you've ever written anything on here you probably know what I mean. People who leave feedback are unsung heroes to anyone who writes.

Now, I know that some of you might be disappointed in the ending I chose for Dipper and Wendy – to be totally honest, I received more comments rooting for them than I had expected, and I think that not developing them further was one of the mistakes I would go back and change if I wrote this over again. So, I apologise if their storyline did nothing but tease you. However, I am currently working on a shorter Wendy/Dipper romance in a totally different universe to My Life in Summers, so you can follow my profile if you'd like to see that. I think it's coming along really well. I aim to start posting it within the next month, maybe two months if I'm lazy.

I'm also currently writing a teen lesbian romance novel, featuring original characters and juicy high school drama. The style of that is very similar to My Life in Summers, part-comedy, part-drama, and if you're interested, I'll eventually post that on a site called Wattpad. I have a bare-bones profile there under the same username as here – I think you can follow it? Maybe? Or just bookmark the page? Or don't? E.T.A. for that story is mid-2019 at the moment.

If neither of those things interest you, then this is where we part ways. Thank you for your attention, and happy new year!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!